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# Edna St. Vincent Millay: The Problem of the Popular Poet in Contemporary America

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EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY:  
THE PROBLEM OF THE POPULAR POET  
IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA

By  
Mary K. Stevens

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
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## VITA

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## INTRODUCTION

Now that the twentieth century approaches its half-way mark, and a second great world war, with its attendant upheavals in ways of life and thought, has had the effect of terminating one era and introducing another, one is tempted to use the present moment as a point of vantage from which to gain a perspective on the literary phenomena of the past quarter-century. Those literary figures whose careers are encompassed by that period especially invite such inspection. It is hard to conceive a more valuable exercise in the development of critical judgment than to trace painstakingly the sincere efforts of a contemporary poet from his early emergence, through development and maturity, to the apparent waning of his career. Nor could the literary critic find a more fascinating example for his study than the phenomenal career of one of the most popular poets of the between-wars period, 1917-1940, Edna St. Vincent Millay. During most of that era, she was one of the most written-about of living poets, as well, perhaps, as the most misunderstood. Her critics were usually partisans who liked her either too well or not well enough.

Now the storm of battle has cleared away, and the fruits of a full and varied poetic career are before us as evidence, along with the considered judgments of many of our most respected critics. Therefore, this student feels not too timorous in attempting an apprecia-

tion and a critical evaluation of Edna St. Vincent Millay in the light of the role she fills in Twentieth Century poetry and of the historical and popular tradition in which she finds her place.

CHAPTER I  
THE MINOR POET IN LITERATURE AS EXEMPLIFIED  
BY EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

It would probably startle the historian or sociologist to hear the stormy, tumultuous, diversified period between 1917 and 1945 referred to as a tidy unit or as represented by any one figure. Yet the biographer of Miss Millay, with considerable justice, bases her eulogistic volume of 1936 upon the question: "Who is our most popular and representative poet?" This query she considered a safe one, since no one would challenge her answer: "Everyone recognizes that Edna St. Vincent Millay represents our time to itself, much as Tennyson represented the period of Victoria to itself or Byron, the period of Romanticism."

As amplification and explanation the biographer asserts: "She is the only living poet who is casually quoted in philosophical treatises and in moving picture magazines, in churches and in night clubs, in the rural schools of Oregon and in the Sorbonne of Paris."<sup>1</sup>

However, in assuming that her statement would be unchallenged, Miss Atkins was optimistic. In his vitriolic review of her over-adulatory book, John Crowe Ransom refuses to admit that an age which had demonstrated its literary preferences by recovering an intellec-

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<sup>1</sup>Elizabeth Atkins, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Her Times (Chicago, 1936), p. vii.

tual poet like John Donne could be represented by Miss Millay.

To be sure, the task of the intellectual poet today is greater than when Donne wrote, Ransom admits, since "intellectual development has had a great acceleration and the mind has travelled far in a hundred directions, all tangential." Moreover, he adds that few Donnes or men of that poetic stature are now living. All these factors, he believes, explain why the poetry of intellectuals today is probably less than completely successful. Yet, he asserts firmly that: "the reassimilation of the split fragments of the world of thought by poetry, even if it rates as a partial accomplishment, is brilliant." And he further declares that he finds "little relationship between such half-successes and Miss Millay's 'triumphs in the treble.'"<sup>2</sup>

It might seem paradoxical to insist that Miss Atkins' statement and Mr. Ransom's contradiction of it are both essentially true but it would not be so. Although these contradictory judgments represent the Scylla and Charybdis upon which much of the criticism of Miss Millay has wasted words, the student of literature, today, can use them rather as guide posts, pointing out the field wherein the famous poet's talent found its considerable scope, and inside the limits of which it should be praised and condemned.

However, considerable study of the implications of both judgments is indicated before they can be put to such familiar use.

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<sup>2</sup>

John Crowe Ransom, "The Poet as Woman," The World's Body (New York, 1938), p. 78.



Removed from context, they perhaps do not indicate the entire meaning of either critic. Miss Atkins has an implied corollary to her assertion that Miss Millay is the most popular and representative poet, claiming that she is among the best. Ransom, while he refuses to admit "representative," does not dispute "popular." In fact he states:

Miss Millay is the best of the poets who are "popular," and loved by Circles and Leagues of young ladies; perhaps as good a combination as you can ever expect of the "literary" poet and the poet who is loyal to the "human interest" of the common reader....Her career has been one of dignity and poetical sincerity. She is an artist.<sup>3</sup>

The conflict between the biographer and her reviewer is not concerned, then, with the unquestioned popularity of the poet, or even with her success or failure, but rather with the quality of that success.

At this point in his reasoning, the student becomes conscious of the necessity of having some definite concepts as to standards of poetic success or failure, as well as of the levels upon which these standards may be demonstrated.

Such general questions occur as: (1) What is poetry and how can it be recognized? (2) What does one mean by intellectual poetry and to what extent can one expect to find ideas in poetry? Ought poetry to explain the human predicament? (3) What is the relation of poetry to life? What function does poetry perform?

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 76.

Of course, volumes have been written since antiquity upon each of these questions and more will be written. When the great Plato banished the poet from his ideal republic on grounds that this imitative art so often appealed not to the rational but to an inferior principle of the soul, he issued a challenge to lovers of poetry, among whom he included himself, to find a use in poetry as well as a delight.<sup>4</sup> The lovers of poetry have been meeting his challenge variously throughout the ages.

We remember the explanation offered by his disciple, Aristotle, who defended the effects of poetry upon the emotions with his theory of "catharsis," a purging of the soul, and who established "poetic imitation" as sharing philosophy's exalted function to discover the ultimate reality behind the fortuitous forms, to seek with thought the pure forces which actuated and motivated all existence.<sup>5</sup>

Twelve hundred years later we recall another great defense of poetry by the Englishman, Sir Philip Sidney, in which he placed the poet even above the philosopher since "he yieldeth to the powers of the mind, an image of that whereof the Philosopher bestoweth but a wordish description: which dooth neyther strike, pierce, nor possess the sight of the soule, so much as the other dooth."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Plato, "The Republic," The Great Critics, edited by Smith and Parks (New York, 1939), p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, as paraphrased in The Great Critics, p. 27.

<sup>6</sup> Sir Philip Sidney, "An Apologie for Poetrie," The Great Critics, p. 201.

His definition of poetry is the first of an endless series which we remember as landmarks in the history of English Literature. We quote his definition:

Poesie therefore is an arte of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in his word Mimesis, that is to say, a representing, counterfetting, or figuring foorth: to speake metaphorically, a speaking picture: with this end, to teach and delight:...<sup>7</sup>

Three hundred years later, we notice that Wordsworth was rephrasing Aristotle:

Aristotle...has said...that Poetry is the most philosophic of writings: it is so: its object is truth, not individual and local but general, and operative; not standing upon external testimony but carried into the heart by passion;...Poetry is the image of man and nature....Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge;...<sup>8</sup>

And another great romantic, Shelley, pronounced: "A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth." He found it an instrument for moral good:

The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause. Poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb.<sup>9</sup>

The nineteenth century came to a close as Matthew Arnold was characterizing poetry as a "criticism of life." Concerning himself with sifting the best poetry from its inferior counterpart, he kept

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>8</sup> William Wordsworth, "Observations Prefixed to 'Lyrical Ballads,'" The Great Critics, p. 508.

<sup>9</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defense of Poetry," The Great Critics, pp. 561-563.

as his standard of value: "It is by a large, free, sound representation of things, that poetry, this high criticism of life, has truth of substance."<sup>10</sup>

Now in the twentieth century, we find the endless analysis and discussion of poetry still going on. Nor, perhaps, for as long as poetry remains a living art will a static, codified set of answers to our very large questions be universally recognized for any length of time. Each reader, in each period, can only form his own criteria guided by the thought of those he finds most competent to judge.

Naturally, a student of twentieth century poetry cannot afford to forget the great tradition of which it is a continuation. However, we realize that each era has its individual problems and innovations and we wish to be alert to critical study and literary standards of the present. Of course, only the briefest of cursory glances is possible as we ignore the many cross-currents and seek the answers offered today to our three large questions in the main stream of contemporary criticism.

Fortunately for us, one student, having diligently perused current critical thought, has summarized her findings. She has defined poetry:

In the discussions studied, the term poetry was reserved for that use of the language that conveys to the reader, not primarily information,

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew Arnold, "The Study of Poetry," The Great Critics, p. 635.

but an experience, a complex involving emotions or feelings.<sup>11</sup>

To this basic definition, Alice Benson has found various outstanding critics imposing such qualifications as that concerning the nature of the experience or complex of emotions or feelings. The experience was described as involving insight into reality unavailable to mind and senses, as "intuitions of modes of being that the intellect cannot know," as "illuminated by those invisible truths which are the basis of reality" and as "involving the fusion or conciliation of numerous, hitherto contradictory, emotional ideas or impulses."

She found agreement among critics in that: "the complex of emotions or feeling that we call poetry, can be conveyed only by appealing, not primarily to the reader's intellect, but to his imagination, or, as some would have it, to his interests."<sup>12</sup>

The majority of critics also agreed that poetic experience--an experience of overwhelming personal emotion--tends to find expression in verse.

This very abstract, generalized summary must serve as our understanding and acceptance of the conclusions of modern criticism upon the first of the problems implicit in the reconciliation of those opposing judgments of which we are to make use in this study.

An understanding of the second problem is more difficult to sum-

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<sup>11</sup> Alice Benson, "Problems of Poetic Diction in Twentieth Century Criticism," PMLA, Vol. LX (March, 1945), p. 271.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 272.

marize since it is not only more specific but it is one engaging the earnest controversial attention of modern critics. To what extent need poetry be intellectual? Critics have agreed that its appeal is primarily not to the intellect but to the imagination. Then what is the place of ideas in poetry?

There is no doubt that they can be found there. I. A. Richards regards poetry as a kind of representative middle ground of human activity which:

...serves, therefore, as an eminently suitable bait for anyone who wishes to trap the current opinions and responses in this middle field for the purpose of examining and comparing them, and with a view to advancing our knowledge of what may be called the natural history of human opinions and feelings.<sup>13</sup>

Agreeing that this is to a certain extent true, Allen Tate cites as evidence the use which historians make of poetry, exhibiting its general features to support still more general theories of history and society. However, he warns against a current heresy of reversing the procedure, allowing social theories to prove something about poetry. Poetry, he warns, does not explain human experience. Such a demand, since it cannot be fulfilled, leads to an ultimate conclusion that poetry has no meaning at all.

Yes, one finds ideas in poetry, Mr. Tate assures us: "Poetry is one test of ideas; it is ideas tested by experience, by the act of direct apprehension."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> I. A. Richards, Practical Criticism (London, 1929), p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Allen Tate, Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas (New York, 1936), page xi.

Our third concept, that of the purpose of poetry is equally a controversial one. Morton Dauwen Zabel complains of a modern demand that poets must not merely be poets.

They must confront the future, blaze a path into the unknown, "carry the language forward," struggle with the dilemmas of life and politics, strain toward the coming enlightenment, defend its eventual triumph, and provide courage and direction for their less presumptuous contemporaries.<sup>15</sup>

This characterization of the poet as a sort of trail-blazer is recognized by the critic as a kind of honor to poetry but it is also recognized as, even more, a source of danger, since it readily lends itself to the purposes of the social utilitarian school of criticism.

Tate's explanation of the true function of poetry reveals its preeminently honorable place among the arts, without libeling it by exaggeration. He states:

...poetry finds its true usefulness in its perfect inutility...when the will and its formulas are put back into an explicit relation with the whole of our experience, we get the true knowledge which is poetry. It is the "kind of knowledge which is really essential to the world, the true content of its phenomena, that which is subject to no change and, therefore is known with equal truth for all time."<sup>16</sup>

Having completed these reflections upon poetry in general, its recognition, content and function, we return to our problem of the individual poet and the quality of success or failure.

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<sup>15</sup> Morton Dauwen Zabel, "Two Years of Poetry, 1937-1939," Southern Review, Vol. 5 (1940), p. 568.

<sup>16</sup> Op. Cit., p. 112.

At once we are aware of another problem. Apparently, one must ask of every poet worthy of the name, that concentration of personally and vividly apprehended experience into the limitations of inevitable form, to which alone can be granted the title of poetry. If one demands this of each, from the greatest to the least, one will require additional qualifications by which one can measure the relative status of the individual poet. Such an additional factor would seem to be, of course, the range and nature of the experience involved, as well as the power and originality of its expression. What range of experience can we expect to find in poetry?

Tate's discussion of some great poets sheds some light upon this problem. He declares in one essay:

Personal revelation of the kind that Donne and Miss Dickinson strove for, in the effort to understand their relation to the world, is a feature of all great poetry; it is probably the hidden motive for writing. It is the effort of the individual to live apart from a cultural tradition that no longer sustains him....Poetry does not dispense with tradition; it probes the deficiencies of a tradition. But it must have a tradition to probe....<sup>17</sup>

This should not be interpreted as the assigning of a new duty to poetry. Matthew Arnold's dictum that poetry is a criticism of life was just so controverted. Misunderstood, both statements sound like cruder forms of I. A. Richards' justification of poetry as "a storehouse of ordered emotional energy that, properly released, might reeducate the

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<sup>17</sup>Tate, Op. Cit., p. 18.



public in the principles of a good life."<sup>18</sup>

Actually, they are a description of the experience which we may expect to find an artist transmuting into poetry. "The world order is assimilated...to the personal vision; it is brought down from abstraction to personal sensibility."<sup>19</sup>

In a chaotic, agnostic era like the present, where there is no unified center of culture, this "assimilating of a world order," we realize, must become not only difficult but well-nigh impossible.

Louise Bogan graphically describes the dilemma of the modern poet:

Our time presses this individual battle [of adjustment to life] into an unbearably tight compass and gives it no aid. The once nourishing and adaptable systems of worship are reduced to the flatness of myth or the mania of superstition; the current social order collapses, as it arose, without dignity; a new order forms based on rigid mass dogma, inimical to isolation and sensitive individual variation alike. The poet realizes only too clearly how diminished he appears, seen against the general let-down and break-up, if he keeps to his proper arena; and it is natural that, in many cases, he turns in panic from his natural place and seeks asylum in the general turmoil.<sup>20</sup>

However, she insists that, even today, it is possible for the poet to "fight it out within the field of his own work, to express himself and his period within his own function, skirting the evils of escape and absorption." She points out Yeats as a great example of a

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<sup>18</sup> I. A. Richards, as quoted by Allen Tate, Op. Cit., p. 104.

<sup>19</sup> Allen Tate, Op. Cit., p. 19.

<sup>20</sup> Louise Bogan, "Conversion into Self," Poetry, Vol. 45 (Feb., 1935), p. 277.

poet who "fronted a grappling world, yet kept his eye, his mind and his hand free for the act of continually maturing creation."<sup>21</sup>

Another reviewer points to Yeats and Rilke as examples of what the major poet can achieve even in an age devoid of tradition or culture:

It is this sense of evil and moral dissolution, playing against and stiffening their conviction of the soul's eventual triumph, that makes the verse of both poets the greatest exoneration of the human spirit that has been written in our century. It is, indeed, an exoneration of poetry itself....Such poetry stands at the center of modern existence. It dignifies the dishonesty and violence of a society that has lost its self-respect and an art that seems often willing to commit every possible apology and compromise to justify its existence. The lives of both Rilke and Yeats are enough to tell modern poets where their art originates and the one wholly indisputable way in which it can be useful to the world.<sup>22</sup>

We have now a clearer concept of the nature and quality of experience in poetry. We also perceive its importance as a factor in judging poetry and as a standard by which to judge relatively the importance of the poet. In the light of our study, we may return with considerably more understanding to those guides quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Miss Atkins and Mr. Ransom.

Making use of the passage of a literary generation, and measuring the products of the poet in the scale of these hastily sketched standards, we are not tempted to join Miss Atkins in her estimation

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 278.

<sup>22</sup> Zabel, Op. Cit., p. 607.

of Miss Millay as one of the "best" or major poets of her age.

In such a case, one's tendency is to swing like a pendulum back to the opposing judgment--here, Mr. Ransom's pronouncement. Certainly, as far as popularity is a gauge, Miss Millay has indisputably met with an astonishing degree of success. Were her "triumphs in the treble?" Again, the significance of the ironic reference requires some thought.

It is interesting to find Mr. Tate making much the same distinction in terms more familiar to critical scholarship. He classifies Edna St. Vincent Millay as a distinguished example of the "second order of poets."<sup>23</sup>

He agrees with her biographer that Miss Millay was, indeed, a typical poet of her age, as Byron was of romanticism and Tennyson, of Victorianism. But he reminds his reader that neither Byron nor Tennyson was of the first order of poets. Thus he warns us:

Being this kind of poet, Miss Millay was not prepared to clear up the point of view of her generation; her poetry does not define the break with the nineteenth century. This task was left to the school of Eliot, and it was predictable that Eliot should be--except by young men who had the experience to share Eliot's problem--ignored and misunderstood. Eliot penetrated to the fundamental structure of the nineteenth-century mind and showed its breakdown. Miss Millay assumed no such profound alteration of the intelligence, because, I suppose, not being an intellect but a sensibility, she was not aware of it. She foreshadowed an age without bringing it to terms.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Op. Cit., p. 222.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 222.

He describes her poetry as "creating an interesting personal attitude" from conventional poetic forms, using the "language of the preceding generation to convey an emotion peculiar to her own." Such personal poetry in conventional form, he declares typical of the second order of poet in any age.<sup>25</sup>

However, we remember the personal revelation of such great poets as Donne or Dickinson and of most poets in an age when a culture has broken up and a universal adjustment to life becomes impossible, forcing the poet as well as his fellows to seek, without aid, his individual adjustment. In this eclectic age, certainly, a personal poetry would be understandable even in a major poet. This, alone, surely would not serve as a differentiation. So we are grateful for Tate's qualification of his category:

Poets of this second order lack the power of creation, in the proper sense, in which something like a complete world is achieved, either in the vast, systematic vision of Milton, or in the allusive power of Webster or Shakespeare: backed only by a piece of common action, an entire world is set up in a line or even a phrase. In these poets, the imaginative focus is less on the personal emotion than on its sub-structure, an order of spiritual life....<sup>26</sup>

It is this latter quality, we recall, that the critic had pointed out in acclaiming Yeats and Rilke as modern poets of major rank and their verse a great exoneration of the human spirit.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Tate, Op. Cit., p. 223.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 223.

<sup>27</sup>Zabel, Op. Cit., p. 607.

The basis of differentiation, then, between the two orders of poetry is that power of creation which is, in turn, dependent upon immense imaginative scope beyond that of the personal. And this power, in a cultureless age of eclecticism and agnosticism, might spring from mystic intuition or, as Ransom would add, from "intellectual power with its treasures...for the field of reference."<sup>28</sup>

So, if the category of a second order of poets is an expansion and explication of Mr. Ransom's ironic tag, "triumphs in the treble," as a classification of Miss Millay's poetry, the student is disposed to accept it basically, but to quarrel with its acrimony.

For, we insist that to estimate a poet as minor is not at all a condemnation. Nor does it indicate success or failure. But it does point out the field within which the poet should be judged. Minor poetry has a limited, but entirely honorable place in our literature. Mr. Tate states this emphatically:

...in an age which has searched for a new construction of the mind and has, in effect, asked every poet for a chart of salvation, it has been forgotten that one of the most valuable kinds of poetry may be deficient in imagination, and yet be valuable for the manner in which it meets its own defects.<sup>29</sup>

Of this, he finds Miss Millay's poetry an example, since: "she has not only given us the personality of her age; she has preserved it in the easiest traditional style."

It is not fair to put Mr. Ransom in the position of opponent to

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<sup>28</sup>Op. Cit., p. 102.

<sup>29</sup>Op. Cit., p. 225.

minor poetry as such. He apologizes, in fact, for unduly stressing the limitations of Miss Millay's poetry in his essay, declaring that he had been goaded into it by the "foolish adoration" of the poet's biographer, as well as other partisan critics.<sup>30</sup>

Tate attempts to explain this remarkable feature of the popular reaction to Miss Millay's poetry. He claims that her "too enthusiastic but misguided partisans have seen too much of their own personalities in her verse to care whether it is great poetry or not; so they proceed to call it great."<sup>31</sup>

Delmore Schwartz excuses this lack of popular critical discernment:

...Miss Millay has written a good many poems...which make her a great poet to most readers of poetry. These readers consider Edgar Allan Poe, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Blake and Shakespeare great poets also; and, if they read Poe, Longfellow, and Miss Millay, rather than Blake and Shakespeare, what else can be expected? How else can these readers sustain their view of what great poetry is?<sup>32</sup>

The sense of this paragraph is stated in different terms in Tate's justification of a second order of poets:

...that second order, without which literature could not bear the weight of Dante and Shakespeare, and without which poetry would lose its average sensibility and become too specialized.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Ransom, Op. Cit., p. 102.

<sup>31</sup>Op. Cit., p. 226.

<sup>32</sup>Delmore Schwartz, "The Poetry of Millay," Nation, Vol. 157 (Dec. 18, 1943), p. 735.

<sup>33</sup>Op. Cit., p. 222.

We have now studied, however briefly, all the immediately available implications of our chosen guides which represented the extremes in critical estimates of Miss Millay as a poet. In consequence, we are able to perceive outlines of the field wherein an estimate of her work will be valid.

For, while to recognize a poet's talent as of the second order is not in itself a matter for condemnation, neither is it an excuse for abrogation of the exercise of critical judgment.

Poetry, on whatever level, should conform to the general definition of poetry as an art which we have outlined in this chapter. Minor poetry must not be taken to mean popular verse because it is often available to a large audience on the plane of popular experience.

If the minor poet is to help give the average reader the perspective to sustain the view of what great poetry is, he must write poetry, not merely verse. And the minor, as well as the major poet, we feel certain, is successful, not in proportion to his popularity, but only in so far as he writes good poetry.

It is with such a standard in mind that I hope to evaluate, critically, the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay, and to estimate her place as a minor poet.

## CHAPTER II

### THE POPULARITY OF EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

Although an analysis of the popularity of a poet, minor or major, is extrinsic to an estimation of his merit as a creative artist, it is intrinsic to an understanding of his poetry and life as a creative artist. Certainly, a very outstanding feature of the career of Edna St. Vincent Millay as a poet of the twentieth century has been her enormous popularity in an era of uncertain and eclectic taste. This popular acclaim has been a factor in much of the critical misunderstanding and partisanship which marked the reception of her poetry.

The student, reviewing the poet's career, becomes aware of two aspects of this phenomenon which engage his attention--the cause of this unusual popularity, and the result of it. This, at first glance, seems hairsplitting for in many fields of endeavor popularity is an anxiously sought end-product of successful achievement. But the student remembers that poetry is an art which exists as an entity entirely independent of its reception. Great poetry has been written which was read scarcely at all by contemporaries--as witness Emily Dickinson's--and minor poetry has been enthusiastically acclaimed for values which were not those of the art of poetry. Popularity in itself, therefore, is not a gauge of success for the poet; but it generally indicates some values of the poetry; and it usually has an effect upon the life of the creative artist, which may, in turn, affect



his poetry.

The cause of Miss Millay's popularity is not difficult to trace, at least in part. Originally, it lay in a remarkable affinity with her generation. Hildegarde Flanner notes this in her statement:

In reading Miss Millay's poetry one is always struck by the thought that she has been fortunate in her time of emergence or that the time was fortunate in her. After the war, and during the early twenties, she expressed particularly for women and for youth a spirit that was symptomatic of the moment...it added much to her immediate popularity.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, Allen Tate has declared that "apart from her merit as a poet, Miss Millay has been, not at all to her discredit, the spokesman of a generation."<sup>2</sup>

How, one asks, can a creative artist, bound only to the concentrating of personally and vividly apprehended experience into the limitations of form, be representative of an era? This problem has been stated as it occurred to one critic in the following form. Schwartz declares that "the notion that a creative author can be a spokesman is a convenient and unanalyzed confusion. Creative authors are not elected like Congressmen or chosen like committees and a creative author can only write well what he truly believes."<sup>3</sup>

However, having posed the problem, he offers an explanation:

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<sup>1</sup>Hildegarde Flanner, "Two Poets: Jeffers and Millay," in After the Genteel Tradition, edited by Malcolm Cowley (New York, 1937), p. 161.

<sup>2</sup>Op. Cit., p. 221.

<sup>3</sup>Op. Cit., p. 735.

...there is an inherent sympathy or rapport between the unique talent of some authors and the leading tendencies of the age. The age draws forth and often helps to fecundate what it can use or what it finds interesting and significant in an author.<sup>4</sup>

This was apparently the case with Miss Millay. Allen Tate assures us:

We do not need to inquire how she came to express the emotions of the literary generation that seized the popular imagination from about 1917-1925. It is a fact that she did, and in such a way as to remain the most typical poet of that generation.<sup>5</sup>

Certainly, it was not a feat accomplished by the crude pandering to current interests of the popular verse writer. Harold Cook, however undependable in many of his observations, is undoubtedly correct in pointing this out:

Many of Miss Millay's contemporaries are already "historical," or rapidly becoming so. Their work will be valuable supplementary reading to a study of their period; their poems are brilliant commentaries on the ideas of economists, immigration bureaux, and social service commissions, or manners and morals, or they are brochures for a new school of writing....Miss Millay's work...will never be read as history (except for the comment implied in the almost total absence of contemporaneous allusion)....<sup>6</sup>

Yet Mr. Schwartz finds her dated in a "good sense." "Like Scott Fitzgerald, H. L. Mencken, Sinclair Lewis, prohibition and midget golf, she belongs to a period. No one interested in that period will

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<sup>4</sup> Schwartz, Op. Cit., p. 735.

<sup>5</sup> Op. Cit., p. 221.

<sup>6</sup> Harold Lewis Cook, "An Essay in Appreciation," A Bibliography of the Works of Edna St. Vincent Millay (New York, 1923), p. 8.

fail to be interested in Miss Millay's poems."<sup>7</sup>

It is interesting to review the steps by which a young girl became so much in sympathy with the spirit of her age as to express the feelings and to win "the enthusiasm of a time intellectually bewildered but moving unsteadily towards an 'emotional attitude'--as the phrase went in those days."<sup>8</sup>

Certainly, a childhood spent in Maine near the ocean, remote from any concern in common with "her generation," was little preparation for such a feat. However, she did write for St. Nicholas Magazine, from 1906 to 1910, poetry which, while typically a child's, revealed talent. In 1910, she graduated from the Saint Nicholas League by writing a letter of thanks and resignation.

Nor was there any hint of rapport with her generation in the mysticism of the long poem "Renascence" with which she made her debut into adult poetry in 1912. In fact, while it was a truly astonishing performance for a nineteen year old poet, it missed winning the prize of the Lyric Year, the magazine in which it was published, because, by an ironic twist, it failed to reveal the "time spirit" to the judges who had been instructed to look for it.<sup>9</sup>

Nor, again, was the cloister-like environment of a young ladies college which was the haven of the poet during the upheavals of the

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<sup>7</sup> Op. Cit., p. 735.

<sup>8</sup> Tate, "Edna St. Vincent Millay," Op. Cit., p. 222.

<sup>9</sup> Atkins, Op. Cit., p. 10.

war of 1914-1917 exactly in the mainstream of current events. Here the poet wrote several poetic plays of which the most outstanding was "The Lamp and the Bell" and, among other poems, a sonnet sequence which she did not publish until 1920. It then appeared in a St. Louis paper called Reedy's Mirror.

So it was natural that her first volume, published in 1917 under the title of Renascence, was a collection of lyric offerings of a purely personal nature, containing the already published title poem and twenty-two other poems of which some fifteen had been published. Among those was the future anthology favorite, "God's World."

The recognition of the volume, moreover, was strictly in the poetic field. Typical of the contemporary critical reaction was Harriet Monroe's pleasure expressed in her review at discovering such a fresh young voice among lyric poets. "One would have to go back a long way in literary history to find a young lyric poet singing so freely and musically," she declared.<sup>10</sup> However, we do notice an "engaging frankness--at times approaching flippancy" unusual in lyric poetry of the period which prepares us for the poet of her later works.<sup>11</sup>

It was in 1917, when the poet graduated from college and moved to New York to make her home in Greenwich Village, that she was caught up in the swing of popular reaction to the war. By showing the in-

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<sup>10</sup> Harriet Monroe, as quoted by Rica Brenner, "Edna St. Vincent Millay," Ten Modern Poets (New York, 1937), p. 67.

<sup>11</sup> Rica Brenner, Op. Cit., p. 70.

efficiency of old standards of conduct and old methods of thinking, the war had encouraged in the new generation an adventuring spirit, a search for new methods, experimentation.<sup>12</sup> Greenwich Village was the mecca of those anxious to express something new in the arts and social sciences--a place of freedom to experiment. Here, Edna St. Vincent Millay, earning her living by writing poetry and by acting or writing for the Provincetown Players, lived a heady life and imbibed the current Zeitgeist.

And, in 1920, she expressed her new concepts in a little set of gay, reckless verses, "A Few Figs from Thistles," which she published first in Salvo, a magazine, and later in book form. Previous to this Miss Millay was known as the author of Renascence and had gained the admiration of a few poetry lovers but no popular audience. Now, with the publication of Figs From Thistles, she became the poet laureate of the younger generation.<sup>13</sup> "To say that it became popular," Miss Atkins declares, "conveys but a faint idea of the truth. Edna St. Vincent Millay became, in effect, the unrivaled embodiment of sex-appeal, the 'It' girl of the hour, the Miss America of 1920."<sup>14</sup>

The immediate popularity of the "Figs" is variously explained. They were not great poetry; they were not especially original in form or content ("carpe diem" had been a current mood before and current

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>13</sup> Anonymous, "Edna St. Vincent Millay," The Literary Spotlight, edited by John Farrar (New York, 1924), p. 78.

<sup>14</sup> Op. Cit., p. 70.

literature was expressing more startling ideas); and, although they shocked the bourgeoisie, they were not at all naughty compared to much of the literature of the period. Miss Atkins is probably correct in ascribing their amazing effect to their brevity and clarity, which made them available to an audience which had not come into contact with much of the "new" art.<sup>15</sup>

Miss Flanner, analyzing primarily from a social utilitarian point of view, declares that in these little verses the poetess actually "gave voice to a new freedom, a new equality, the right of the woman to be as inconstant in love as the man and as demanding of variety." To what extent it was actually applied as a new ethic by Miss Millay's very numerous admirers, the critic does not estimate. However, she does call it a "timely statement of intellectual and biological equality, an aspect of feminism for the first time put into poetry of audacity, lyrical quality and vogue."<sup>16</sup>

Of course, it serves no particular purpose to guess, but it is interesting to speculate upon the effect that these poems and the succeeding, more serious statements of the same basic ideas in Second April, of 1921, had upon their less sophisticated audience. Mr. Tate comments sardonically upon this:

Her statement about those times in A Few Figs From Thistles and Second April was not profound; morally, it has been said, it did perceptible damage

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<sup>15</sup> Atkins, Op. Cit., p. 70.

<sup>16</sup> Op. Cit., p. 162.

to our young American womanhood, whose virgin impatience competed noisily with the Armistice and the industrial boom.<sup>17</sup>

Speaking of the Figs, one critic expresses a common reaction in declaring them a stunt to shock the bourgeoisie, unworthy of the poet's talent. Indeed, he adds, "this sort of thing, lures small town lasses to the village and true bohemians to respectable apartment houses."<sup>18</sup>

More important to the student than the effect of Miss Millay's verses upon their audience is the effect of Miss Millay's verses upon herself.

The devoted Harold Cook painstakingly and truthfully lists at least three results. One was, of course, the acquiring of a large audience to which to address future work; another, he claims, was the establishment for the author of the right to speak, and for women, in general, the right to speak with complete frankness and freedom from imposed conventional attitudes.<sup>19</sup>

A perhaps less fortunate result duly noted by Mr. Cook is the creation of a Millay legend. This is described in a delightful sketch with full journalistic color by an anonymous critic in John Farrar's The Literary Spotlight, published in 1924. Picturing her charmingly unusual appearance and her marvelous, studied attitudes, he finds that

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<sup>17</sup> Op. Cit., p. 222.

<sup>18</sup> Alfred Kreyenborg, Our Singing Strength (New York, 1929), p. 441.

<sup>19</sup> Op. Cit., p. 77.

there has grown up a Byronic legend about her which she has accepted, probably has been flattered by and perhaps even has tried, after a fashion, to live up to.<sup>20</sup>

So picturesque a legend could be an unfortunate result only because it is a hazard for a poet to have any attitude to maintain which may prevent him from honestly reacting to experience. It is to Miss Millay's credit that she struck a note of complete sincerity as often as she did. Aided by several critics, we will notice and point out in our study of her work, how often this "poets legend about a poet" had such a deleterious effect upon the quality of her poetry. We will become aware of how often her very popularity and rapport with her age cause her to assume attitudes for ulterior reasons, to shock, to protest or to pout in a fit of feminine pique.

To summarize the succeeding work of Miss Millay's very active literary career, we can consult Mr. Yost's excellent bibliography.<sup>21</sup> To review briefly: in 1921, Miss Millay published Second April, a volume of lyrics of much more serious a poetic tone and Aria da Capo, a poetic play dramatizing the war in masque fashion, which was presented by the Provincetown Players. In the following year, she won the Pulitzer Award with "The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver," which she published in 1923 in a volume entitled The Harp-Weaver and other Poems.

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Op. Cit., p. 77.

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Harold Yost, A Bibliography of the Works of Edna St. Vincent Millay (New York and London, 1937), *passim*.



This probably marked the climax of her now established reputation and inaugurated the two decades of lionizing by women's clubs and popular literary study groups which have been her subsequent fortune--or misfortune, as her more understanding critics would have it.

It is interesting in this connection to read a typical study plan of 1925 for the women's clubs. It is outlined by Paul and Elizabeth Green for the twelfth meeting of such a group and is introduced with a short summary:

Edna St. Vincent Millay is named by her most ardent admirers as the greatest woman poet America has produced; more conservative critics would place her certainly among the most eminent of our lyricists and, to the general public, she is one of the most popular of modern poets.<sup>22</sup>

Such an adulatory audience received her next volume of lyric poems in 1928, The Buck in the Snow. It also received with considerable excitement in 1931, the sonnet sequence, Fatal Interview, which recorded with utmost frankness and considerable sincerity an extra-marital amour. This and her preceding love lyrics caused John Wheelwright to remark that Miss Millay had sold free love to the women's clubs.<sup>23</sup>

During this period, The King's Henchman, in 1927, represented a departure from her usual type of work. It was a poetic libretta for an opera by Deems Taylor with an Anglo-Saxon setting. Another such

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<sup>22</sup> Paul Green and Elizabeth Lay Green, "Twelfth Meeting," Contemporary American Literature (Chapel Hill, 1925), p. 45.

<sup>23</sup> As quoted by Delmore Schwartz, Op. Cit., p. 736.

departure, considerably less successful, in 1936, was a translation of Baudelaire's Fleurs du Mal, in collaboration with George Dillon.

Wine From These Grapes, in 1934, represented her most mature achievement in the lyric vein. It was followed in 1937 by another "tour de force," Conversation at Midnight, which was a poetic dramatization of the current religious and social points of view.

Huntsman What Quarry?, in 1939, returned to the personal lyrics and sonnets which were her most typical forms. Make Bright the Arrows, her 1940 "notebook," also continued in her lyric patterns but found themes in the imminent world catastrophe. Since then, she has written only two long, rather journalistic poems, "The Murder of Lidice" and "There are No Islands Any More," occasioned by events of the second great world war.

From Greenwich Village hoyden to the mistress of the lecture stages and culture platforms--it was a considerable step. But looked at from the standpoint of an environment for a creative artist, it was a step in the wrong direction. Dr. Zabel caustically describes the conditions of the role:

...the perpetual "few words" of adoring welcome from the lady in the chair, the cooing regurgitations of yearning and titillated audiences, the fawning devotion of admirers with books they want autographed.<sup>24</sup>

In addition, he deplores the effect of becoming a sort of "national figurehead of poetry, a wielder of power and dispenser of

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<sup>24</sup>

Op. Cit., p. 572.

balms, the kind of goddess of art hailed by Elizabeth Atkins in her trowel-applied hosanna, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Her Times, or by Professor Robert P. Tristram Coffin in what must pass as the prize specimen of blurbing gush that has yet been inflicted upon any American writer (New York Herald-Tribune Books, May 21, 1939)."<sup>25</sup>

Such an atmosphere of "fatuous adulation and befuddling prestige" is, for a creative artist, not only not conducive to poetic growth, but really a kind of ordeal by fire. Only the very stiffest sort of personal integrity in the individual poet, observes the critic, could save him from yielding to the pressure to accommodate mass taste by re-writing past favorites.<sup>26</sup>

Nor did Miss Millay emerge unscathed. A definite curtailment of poetic growth, noted by most critics, undoubtedly finds here, to a great extent, its source. Yet, in itself, this failure need not spell defeat to a minor poet. Some poets, Dr. Zabel points out, such as Marvell, Morike and Housman made of the curtailment of their growth an advantage, resulting in "a refining and subtilizing concentration of their limited means, a firmer stamping into the substance of their language of the characteristic bent of their minds and emotions."<sup>27</sup> Only when it leads to vulgarizing by repetition does it become an un-

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<sup>25</sup>Zabel, Op. Cit., p. 572.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 573.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 573.

forgiveable sin in a minor poet. But, of this fault, he and other critics have found Miss Millay guilty, especially in her latest work.

A study of Miss Millay as a personality and as a poetic sensibility should help the student to understand the reasons for a curtailment of poetic growth, and for the effect of this curtailment on a talent so considerable as to produce, in spite of these twin handicaps of popularity and inflated reputation, genuine poetry.

CHAPTER III  
HER PERSONALITY AND SENSIBILITY  
AS A FACTOR IN HER WORK

Poetry, like any art form, exists as an artistic entity, independent of its creator. Nor, ideally, should the biography or personality of the poet have much greater relation to his poetry than that of the sculptor to his statue. And, in the greatest poetry, this is exactly so; since, as we discovered in the initial chapter, the imaginative focus goes beyond the personal emotion or experience to its sub-structure, an order of spiritual life.<sup>1</sup>

In minor poetry, however, the poet often sings, sometimes very poignantly, in such a personal voice of his own emotions and experiences that we can not help becoming conscious of the poet as well as of his music.

We have recognized Edna St. Vincent Millay as a poet of this type. In fact, surveying her works in 1945, we find very few exceptions to an analysis in 1925: "Her theme is herself."<sup>2</sup> Because, then, of the very personal nature of her poetry, we need feel no incongruity in hoping to achieve a better understanding of the successes and failures.

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<sup>1</sup> Tate, Op. Cit., p. 223.

<sup>2</sup> Clement Wood, "Edna St. Vincent Millay: A Clever Sappho," Poets of America (New York, 1925), p. 212.

of her work in a study of her personality which, paradoxically enough, we must find revealed in her poetry.

At first glance, one would expect little difficulty in outlining the personality of a woman lyric poet who, for over two decades, has written with unusual frankness of her experiences and emotions. But one would be reckoning without the complexity of women in general, and Edna St. Vincent Millay in particular.

The issue is confused at first by a popular misconception of her personality which we have already pointed out as the Millay legend. Not every poet, one critic reminds us, can have a legend. "There must be something in his personality as well as in his poetry to stimulate the imagination of his fellows and make them project their own wishes upon his image. That is not always his fault; and it may be his misfortune."<sup>3</sup>

We have already traced the Millay legend to its source in those very light little "vers de société" in A Few Figs From Thistles, which caught the popular fancy after the first World War. We have found the reason for its surprising success, not in its originality, sheer wit or outrageous naughtiness, but in its popular and timely re-statement of a prevalent "carpe-diem" mood. To the disillusioned, intellectually and morally bewildered, post-war generation, in a vague mood of rebellion, this new voice, with its "diverting mixture of solemnity and

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<sup>3</sup> Anonymous, Op. Cit., p. 82.

levity,"<sup>4</sup>its cynical optimism and youthful zest, was refreshing. Moreover, the new voice was that of a young and attractive woman who was to speak with complete freedom of love and sex in an age when feminism was a popular issue.

This was enough to start a sort of Byronic legend which the young girl-poet, with a distinct flair for the dramatic, did little to discourage. A critic in 1924 gives such a charming portrait of the new poet that, in spite of its length, I beg leave to quote it:

Edna St. Vincent Millay is a slim young person with chestnut brown hair, shot with glints of bronze and copper, so that sometimes it seems auburn and sometimes golden; a slightly snub-nose and freckles; a child mouth; a cool grave voice and gray-green eyes. With these materials she achieves a startling variety of appearances. When she is reading her poetry, she will seem, to awed spectators, a fragile little girl with apple-blossom face. When she is picnicking in the country, she will be with her snub nose, freckles, carrotty hair and boyish grin, an Irish "newsy." When she is meeting the bourgeoisie in its lair, she is likely to be a highly artificial and very affected young lady with an exaggerated Vassar accent and abominably overdone manners. In the basement of the Brevoort or in the Café de la Rotunde in Paris, or the Cafe Royal in London, she will appear a languid creature of a decadent civilization, looking wearily out of ambiguous eyes and smiling faintly with her doll's mouth, exquisite and morbid. A New England nun, a chorus girl on a holiday, the Botticelli Venus of the Uffizi Gallery.<sup>5</sup>

This little character sketch, contemporary with her earliest period, is not only charming in itself but it betrays a love of attitudin-

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<sup>4</sup>Tate, Op. Cit., p. 221.

<sup>5</sup>Anonymous, Op. Cit., p. 77.

izing and playing to an audience that, when manifested in her poetry, has corrupted its sincerity.

Thus a critic in 1927 notices a somewhat sensational appeal in much of Miss Millay's less important work. He describes a sensation of a dual personality in her work: her poetic character, and another which attracts attention upon other than literary grounds. Elaboration upon this he declares:

In one character, until recently the dominating one, she appears as a disillusioned, modern woman, independent, a little self-suspicious, cynical, yet not without a distinct zest for life. She often writes flippantly, striking attitudes in the midst of her cynicism....In her first character, Miss Millay is always histrionic and frequently sentimental.<sup>6</sup>

The Byronic mood which resulted, the critic analyzes, in combination with novel frankness (or, as he calls it, "a certain lack of reticence, rare indeed in the poetry written by women"), attracted the attention of thousands who were more interested in the poet than in her poetry as such.<sup>7</sup>

This is not, of course, Miss Millay's true personality--or, as the one critic would say, her poetic character. Indeed, it would not be fair for the student of her poetry today to consider such a romantic, synthetic character at all, except that Miss Millay, upon occasion, allowed its influence to enter into her poetry where sincerity is of

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<sup>6</sup> Edward Davison, "Edna St. Vincent Millay," English Journal (Nov., 1927), p. 672.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



the essence. As one critic declares:

It is true,...that an extravagance of feeling, an indulgence of legendary anguish that belongs to the ultra places and not to the heart of poetry, have thrived beyond wisdom in her lines. One deploras the overdramatic ring in a brilliant measure.<sup>8</sup>

Another early critic expresses it quaintly. Accusing her of sometimes substituting cleverness for sincerity, he asserts that she "has her golden tongue in her cheek."<sup>9</sup>

Having eliminated this pseudo-personality, we can concern ourselves with that very real and earnest character of Miss Millay which we find expressed in her best work.

But, if it is easy to dispose of what Miss Millay is not, it isn't as easy to outline clearly for oneself exactly what she is. Unlike such poets as Housman, or even Jeffers whose poetry reflects a single, limited but intensely sincere view of life, Miss Millay has written in many and varied moods for over two decades. Nor has she ever subscribed to any clearly outlined philosophy of life.

She has been called by various reviewers, at different times: a neo-pagan, a mystic, a hedonist, an idealist, a feminist. She has been called emotional, objective, individualistic, egocentric and passionately rebellious. All these categories and descriptions have been justified in varying degrees.

Now this can be partly explained by Mr. Tate's characterization of her as a sensibility rather than an intellect. That her approach to

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<sup>8</sup> Flanner, Op. Cit., p. 164.

<sup>9</sup> Wood, Op. Cit., p. 212.

life was emotional rather than reasoned, commentators upon her poetry universally agree. The misogynic Mr. Ransom, especially, analyzes this lack of intellectual interest, but terms it femininity or, rather, deficiency in masculinity!<sup>10</sup>

Nor was Miss Millay ever hesitant about recording even conflicting moods. In fact, she indulges personal moods, Mr. Ransom declares, "in the kind of integrity that is granted to the kind of mind that has no direction or modulation except by its natural health."<sup>11</sup> Another critic notices "an egotism never weak" which never allowed Miss Millay to lose confidence in the importance of her emotions. In her words: "She has never been apologetic about the right to love or suffer."<sup>12</sup>

However, as defined in the dictionary, personality is "the totality of an individual's characteristics, especially as they concern his relations to other people...an integrated group of emotional trends, interests and behavior tendencies." Thus, in a sincere recording of the emotions and experiences of half a life-time, one can reasonably expect to trace a pattern of a personality and its adjustment to its environment. Nor would one expect such a pattern to remain fixed. Louise Bogan capably points this out:

In any period, at maturity, the break between the artist's early instinctive adjustment or lack of adjustment to a limiting world, and his later

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<sup>10</sup> Op. Cit., p. 77.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>12</sup> Flanner, Op. Cit., p. 164.

more conscious and rational choices, bred out of experience, must be accomplished. The poet, particularly, as he matures, is faced with the antagonisms of complexity and loss: if he is capable of any growth he has more intimations to synthesize and more disorganization to bear while comforting delusion softens the brutality of each new crisis, as it arises, with lessened power.<sup>13</sup>

The poet's first adult poem, "Renaissance," written at the age of nineteen, was indeed one of mystic vision. Because of its complete sincerity and utter unself-consciousness, it should help us in discerning the poet's first "instinctive adjustment or lack of adjustment to a limiting world."

In it, one critic finds the key to her personality. It proved to Arthur Dubois that Miss Millay was unusually precocious, a mystic, a woman, and a poet. These, he claims, are four phases of a single personality, not evidence of a compound of split personalities. Because, as the critic believes, an insistence upon keeping her identity inviolate is the commonest underlying theme in her poetry, he devotes a long and unduly complicated study to finding "the common denominator between the three or four numerators: precocious child, authentic poet, woman and mystic."<sup>14</sup>

Mr. Dubois finds that in "Renaissance" it is personal identity that prevents infinity from closing in completely. He follows up his lead, finding that it is loss of identity which makes death perpetually

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<sup>13</sup> Bogan, Op. Cit., p. 277.

<sup>14</sup> Arthur Dubois, "Edna St. Vincent Millay," Sewanee Review, Vol. XLIII (1935), passim.

dreadful in later poems. Again, in the sonnets, it is continuity of personal identity, he finds, that permits the going and coming of lovers; and in other poems it is a grasping for a continuance of her own identity which makes Miss Millay plead to be read after death.

James McBride Dabbs, too, sees in "Renaissance" a key to Miss Millay's early adjustment to her environment as well as her later development. However, he interprets the poem differently. Its significance lies for him in the duality of its mystic vision. The two pictures, he claims, do not fuse. This is his interpretation:

Suddenly conscious of the misery of man, the poet is crushed between the weight, and dies. From this death, she is revived by a vision of natural beauty, so convincing that at last she cries out:

God, I can push the grass apart  
And lay my finger on Thy Heart!

But how does this conclusion follow? Only,...by an evasion of the problem the poet herself set. The sufferings of man are not resolved in the beauty of nature; they are forgotten. The poet's renewed life springs up without root, and is therefore destined to wither soon.<sup>15</sup>

Mr. Dabbs realizes that this poem was perhaps the development of a mood, but he insists it is symptomatic of her reaction to experience. Here, he claims, is a "fissure that cuts straight through the spiritual life: on one side tortured man, on the other, a peaceful God." The poet, he declares, does not resolve it in this poem or in her later work. Yet he insists she should have "quarreled with herself" until

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<sup>15</sup> James McBride Dabbs, "Edna St. Vincent Millay, Not Resigned," South Atlantic Quarterly, Vol. 37 (Jan., 1938), p. 54.

she had made one picture of the two. Greater poetry would have resulted, he asserts, pointing out in proof Yeats' declaration that we make poetry out of the quarrel with ourselves and only rhetoric of the quarrel with others.<sup>16</sup>

This is, of course, asking one poet to be another. Miss Millay was probably not introspective or analytical enough to be consciously aware of such a dichotomy. Dr. Zabel notes that, while she has all "the energy and self-confidence, the drive and go, that her successors so often want...she lacks all the severe sensibility, the painful moral and aesthetic self-knowledge, the psychic tensions" that have given so many poets harrowing ordeals.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, her immense vitality and enthusiasm for even "the shining fragments of life" in many of her early poems distracted attention from her uncertain vision. It is significant that "Renascence" closed in an optimistic mood, unjustifiable though it was.

Nevertheless, even in her earliest poems, Mr. Dabbs can point out varying moods which betray underlying conflicts that prevent the evolution of a consistent scheme of values. In "Second April," he points out her declaration that "Beauty is not enough," and in "Interim," her cry that "Not Truth but Faith it is / That keeps the world alive." Such moods represent reactions to the unjustified optimism of "Renascence" and are as incomplete and romantic, the critic declares, in their turn,

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>17</sup>Op. Cit., p. 572.

as the first.<sup>18</sup>

Even in the early "Figs," an anonymous critic declares, the light mockery has a forced note. They actually represent, he asserts, "the ratiocinations of a creative artist at odds with life and love, half fearful of some desperate and fatal trap, half proud of his escape."<sup>19</sup>

In "Second April," the same critic declares, "we find the real attitude that underlies these frivolities--and it is far from being a frank acceptance of the facts of life." Especially, he points to the last sonnet, in which the poet repudiates with cold anger, the lovers' "mouth of clay, these mortal bones against my body set" and "all the puny fever and frail sweat of human love." This "fierce Manichean denunciation" of the body and its poor joys, the critic asserts:

...is not modern...it is something very ancient  
--an austere religious idealism, nonetheless  
austere and nonetheless a religion because it  
now has artists for its priests. It is a belief  
in something beyond the mortal life--the immor-  
tality, in this instance of art. It is in a  
sense a rebellion against sex...against being a  
woman.<sup>20</sup>

It seems clear that the earliest poems revealed a confusion of values. Mr. Dabbs, a very thorough student, has analyzed these carefully, and emerged with a list of three general unresolved conflicts in Miss Millay's vision of life, foreshadowed in the earliest

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<sup>18</sup> Op. Cit., p. 55.

<sup>19</sup> Anonymous, Op. Cit., p. 82.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Renaissance and appearing in varying forms throughout her poetry.

First, he lists her conception of man-versus-nature with God on the side of nature, or more simply, and as it appeared in poems after "Renaissance," a universe indifferent to man. Second, he places her feeling of opposition between human love and beauty. This is clearest in "The Concert" and the "Fatal Interview" series but perceptible throughout. She never, he declares, perceived a cause-and-effect relationship which such a poet as Dante discovered. Third, he notices a conflict, implied but not expressed in "Renaissance," which is especially important in her work. It is between the poet's fear of life in general and her intense delight in the sensory aspect of life.<sup>21</sup>

This delight in sensation, he claims, has caused many to admire her for her "love of life." Indeed, Mr. Dubois, conscious of this same characteristic, calls Miss Millay a hedonist "because hedonism is the will to enjoy oneself and to enjoy beauty."<sup>22</sup>

Miss Millay, herself, believes that her irreconciliation to death, most vividly recorded in "Moriturus" of The Buck in the Snow, proceeded from a love of life, rather than a fear of death. True, Ludwig Lewisohn called her a pagan with a troubled conscience and peaceless heart and called "Moriturus" an anguished cry of "Timor mortis conturbat me." His analysis was that: "One could not be a pagan with-

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<sup>21</sup> Dabbs, Op. Cit., p. 56.

<sup>22</sup> Op. Cit., p. 100.

out a sob in one's voice and an ache in one's soul, and the terror of death was tempered by no slacked thirst of the senses nor any satisfaction of the variable beast.<sup>23</sup>

Miss Millay, herself, would not admit this. In her introduction to Harold Cook's essay, she agrees with the latter's interpretation that it is not an "undignified fear of death" but a love of life which makes her so bitterly resentful of death. Her anecdote was to illustrate this:

That is as if one should say of a small boy who, because it is his bed-time is forcibly separated from a large plate of ice-cream, that he struggles and howls because he is afraid of his bed.<sup>24</sup>

Mr. Cook says of the key-poem of this mood: "'Moriturus' shouts with a love, a greed for life; with an almost desperate haste is death named away, called little, called nothing though the poem ends with a struggle that suggests Death as a formidable antagonist."<sup>25</sup>

Mr. Dabbs asserts, however, that Miss Millay's love of life is largely practical and on the imaginative or spiritual level it is extremely weak. He agrees with the poet and with Mr. Cook that she has a "desperate will for life." He remembers, moreover, that Harriet Monroe had called the very first poem, "Renaissance," a "poem of desperate faith." In fact, the critic believes it is this very quality

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<sup>23</sup>

Ludwig Lewisohn, Expression in America (New York, 1932), p. 576.

<sup>24</sup>

Edna St. Vincent Millay in the Forward to "Essay in Appreciation," by Harold Cook, Op. Cit., p. 3.

<sup>25</sup>

Op. Cit., p. 31.



which has made her the spokesman of such a large audience, most of whom have had, in greater or lesser degree, this same practical will.<sup>26</sup>

However, he finds her deficient in "that love which is understanding, and that understanding which is love--in that detached love which is the mark of the artist and of every man in so far as he is an artist. Nor has she a quality which belongs to love at its best--trust."<sup>27</sup>

Even in her love of nature he notices a possessiveness. In "God's World" her desire to establish herself among and in things he finds typical of a poetry of the will.<sup>28</sup> Allen Tate, in his analysis of this type of poetry, pointed out this mood as a common phenomenon: "A poetry of the will is a poetry of sensation, for the poet surrenders to his sensations of the object in his effort to identify himself with it and to own it."<sup>29</sup>

We have already noted that the aspect of the love of life, which is revealed in the love of persons, is, as Mr. Dabbs expresses it, "shot thru with distrust." This, too, the critic declares, is characteristic of a poet who is concerned with his own will. "She does not understand freedom in love, being too concerned for the wreaking of her individual will upon the world."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Dabbs, Op. Cit., p. 58.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> As quoted by Dabbs, Op. Cit., p. 58.

<sup>30</sup> Op. Cit., p. 59.

Again, as she is distrustful of human relationships, she is distrustful of time as a bringer of things, distrustful of the future.

"Carpe diem" was the Zeitgeist of her generation, but it represented then, as always, a fallacy; and, as a creative artist, she could have attained a truer perspective. Mr. Dabbs analyzes this:

For, if she trusted time, and life, and let herself go, she would find in the moment both future and past: the moment would take on something of the quality of timelessness. Instead of this, she grasps at the moment as she does at life; and, of course, the moment slips away--which is what she expected. In her attempt to seize life, she has merely succeeded in breaking it to pieces. But, for that matter, the very attempt to seize it indicates that it is already broken to pieces, or at least divided into spiritual and physical and so destroyed. The physical quality of a moment can be known sensuously, can be grasped, which means it will escape the grasp; the complete moment, physical and spiritual, can be known only imaginatively and, thus known, it remains.<sup>31</sup>

When Miss Millay, like any of us, tries to grasp time, Mr. Dabbs explains, she becomes the slave of time. Thus, in her little verse, she is actually saying: "If I loved you Wednesday, then I do not love you Thursday, for now on Thursday, Wednesday is gone. And indeed, I could not be sure even on Wednesday that I loved you, for thousands of days, each with its possible love, still lay before me, and about these, 'How shall I know, unless I go / To Cairo or Cathay?'"

This, Mr. Dabbs assures us, is "to break time up into an infinite series of moments and out of these to construct life." However, he

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<sup>31</sup>Dabbs, Op. Cit., p. 60.

insists: "It is not possible, for life is not a mathematical sum but a poetic experience, the moments of which are not fractions but symbols of the whole. Life is not quantitative but qualitative."<sup>32</sup>

Mr. Tate states the same conclusion: "For the imaginative whole of life is the wholeness of vision at a particular moment of experience; it yields us the quality of experience." And this power of seizing the inward meaning of experience, a power, he assures us, of sheer creation--the vision of the whole of life--is a quality of the imagination.<sup>33</sup>

But poets, sometimes, and for various reasons, evade their responsibility of seeking the totality of experience. Allen Tate traces the two most common ways in which this is done. One attitude toward poetry he calls the spirit of the practical will by which the poet tries to explain experience. First, he analyzes, it found its expression in morality and allegory, and now, in a scientific age, it appeals to abstract ideas. The second attitude he describes as a development of the second phase of the first in that it is a revolt against the domination of science. In poetry this attitude has given us, he finds, the emotion known as romantic irony.<sup>34</sup>

The pure scientific spirit of the first evasion of dependence upon creative imagination he calls "a positive Platonism, a cheerful con-

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>33</sup> Tate, Op. Cit., p. 84.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

fidence in the limitless power of man to impose abstractions upon his experience." The second, romantic irony, he describes as a negative Platonism, "a self-pitying disillusionment with the positive optimism of the other program: the romantic tries to build up a set of fictitious 'explanations' by means of rhetoric more congenial to his unscientific temper."<sup>35</sup>

The romantic poet tries to substitute his own will for the creative imagination. But the will cannot do well the work of the imagination, and it only does badly the work of science, so the poet is certain to be frustrated since his instrument is not adequate to his real purpose. Such a frustration Mr. Tate calls romantic irony.<sup>36</sup>

With this classification in mind, it is interesting to observe the attitude of Miss Millay toward her experience and its expression in poetry. From a study of her unscientific, emotional temperament, it is evident that she could not be accused of the positive Platonism, confident of the power of man to impose abstractions upon experience. But, one notices a remarkable similarity between her approach to experience and that described by Mr. Tate, as typical of the romantic poet. Miss Millay has said of herself: "I was ever a ten-o'clock scholar at the school of experience."<sup>37</sup> This is probably as sincerely introspective a statement as she has made of herself. Mr. Dabbs observes

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<sup>35</sup> Tate, Op. Cit., p. 88.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>37</sup> Edna St. Vincent Millay, as quoted by Dabbs, Op. Cit., p. 59.

that this confession is indeed true. He amplifies it: "She has been so busy telling life what she wanted that she has only rarely heard life telling her what it can give."<sup>38</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that her poetry is described by one critic as "a song of rebellion, insubordination and irreconciliation with the realities of life,"<sup>39</sup> and by another as "an endless battle without hope."<sup>40</sup> It is understandable when Ludwig Lewisohn says of Miss Millay's career: "The whole thing in its totality is like a medieval morality."<sup>41</sup>

For the poet who opposes his will to reality, once he feels the inadequacy of the poetic will, has only the alternative of disillusionment with life after the defeat of the will, or that extreme measure of Rimbaud, the perfect romantic poet, who saw that, "given the satisfaction of the will as a necessity of the age, the poet must either destroy his will or repudiate poetry for a career of action."<sup>42</sup>

Miss Millay has been known as a poet of rebellion. Mr. Dabbs graphically describes this:

Distrusting life, grasping at time, feeling the moment slip like sand between her fingers,

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<sup>38</sup> Op. Cit., p. 59.

<sup>39</sup> Sister Mary James Power, "Edna St. Vincent Millay," Poets of Prayer (New York and London, 1938), p. 26.

<sup>40</sup> Dabbs, Op. Cit., p. 63.

<sup>41</sup> Op. Cit., p. 578.

<sup>42</sup> Tate, Op. Cit., p. 98.

Miss Millay lives continually in the presence of death, fears it, and struggles, though she knows futilely, against it. Occasionally she is so weary that she longs for death. Generally, however, her attitude is one of rebellion.<sup>43</sup>

And, to some readers who have shared her will for life, she has seemed very brave in her refusal to be resigned to death. Harold Cook is only one of her many admirers to find in this attitude "an immense courage."<sup>44</sup>

Yet, it is easy to see that it is not wise to rebel against the inevitable. Death occurs, actually, quite regardless of our will. "Only poetry," Mr. Dabbs supplements Mr. Tate, "only the imagination, illumining the subject from within, can avail anything. Mankind generally has understood this and has written its dirges with music."<sup>45</sup>

But, as Mr. Cook notes (though he misunderstands the significance of his observation), Miss Millay has written little poetry of death:

She has written no poems on death; one finds no-where in her work that anatomy of dying to be found in the pages of many contemporary poets.... She is too honest to clothe Death in the flowing draperies of some twilight mystery; too intelligent to accept the speciousness of the professional optimist be he clinic or scientist.<sup>46</sup>

It is evident that Miss Millay has had no temptation to accept the scientific optimism of the one attitude toward poetry and experience. Mr. Ransom states this concisely when he calls her "an absolute

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<sup>43</sup>

Dabbs, Op. Cit., p. 60.

<sup>44</sup>

Op. Cit., p. 34.

<sup>45</sup>

Dabbs, Op. Cit., p. 61.

<sup>46</sup>

Op. Cit., p. 32.

antiphilosopher" who will neither accept nor gloze death. He adds, typically enough, that he considers it a case of "indomitable feminine principle."<sup>47</sup>

But if it is evident that she is not guilty of the one misconception of the poet's art, it is equally apparent that she is not as innocent of the other. Especially in her poetry on death is this noticeable. Instead of imagining death or giving it spiritual form, she breaks her will against it. As a natural consequence she is frustrated and disillusioned.

As Mr. Dabbs analyzes it: "In spite of all her talk about death, Miss Millay understands for a poet far too little of what she is talking about. She attempts to make up for this lack of knowledge by intensity of will. She senses death too much, sees it too little."<sup>48</sup>

Indeed, she has placed such emphasis upon the material side of life, upon sensation, that she has been called by Miss Atkins and others a belated Elizabethan. In one of her many references to this, Miss Atkins phrased it: "The same Elizabethan qualities are in Millay's first sonnets as in 'The Lamp and the Bell,' especially the impression they give us of being with some one alive in all five senses."<sup>49</sup>

Such admirers have believed her intensely alive. Intensity of

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<sup>47</sup>Ransom, Op. Cit., p. 104.

<sup>48</sup>Op. Cit., p. 61.

<sup>49</sup>Op. Cit., p. 49.

sensation, however, is not always a sign of vigorous health. As Mr. Dabbs points out, it may be a quality of decadence. Certainly he finds little similarity between the truly young Elizabethan attitude toward the physical and that of Miss Millay. While the Elizabethans imagined the earth as sentient and sympathetic, Miss Millay found it alien. While the Elizabethan never underestimated the importance of the body, he never thought, as Miss Millay often seems to, especially in her poems on death, of a person as a body alone.<sup>50</sup>

Nor does Miss Millay seem logical in this black picture of death when she seems to conceive of life as so much more than physical. We noticed one critic's observation of her "fierce Manichean denunciation of the body and the poor joys it had to offer," of her austere idealism of art and beauty.<sup>51</sup> Logically, the critic points out, in so far as we find life physical, we shall find death physical; in so far as we find life more than physical, we shall find death more than physical.<sup>52</sup>

Mr. Dabbs explains this in the phraseology of Tate and Yeats. He declares that the poet, angered by the thwarting of the will--attacks the disorder of death rhetorically, instead of attempting to reduce it to order imaginatively.<sup>53</sup> This refers to Mr. Tate's amplification of W. B. Yeats' statement that "rhetoric is the will trying to do the work

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<sup>50</sup> Op. Cit., p. 61.

<sup>51</sup> Anonymous, Op. Cit., p. 83.

<sup>52</sup> Dabbs, Op. Cit., p. 61.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.



of the imagination." Mr. Tate adds: "Rhetoric is the pseudo-explanation of unimagined material."<sup>54</sup> Miss Millay, by refusing to accept, by declining to face actuality, by failing to ponder experience, was neglecting the truest task of the poet. Instead she, like Byron, engaged in "the endless quest of the romantic who ranges over nature in an effort to impose his volitional ego as an absolute upon the world."<sup>55</sup>

Such a quest could not meet with satisfaction any more than the scientist's seeking is ever at an end. But, Mr. Tate quotes Shopenhauer, "art...is everywhere at its goal."<sup>56</sup>

Miss Millay's earliest utterance recounted with such force the struggle of her will with the world and lamented with such poignancy its frustration that her incomplete vision was concealed from her readers. However, Mr. Dabbs finds that once her native enthusiasm waned, the inevitable somberness of her confused quarrel with the world became evident. This point was reached, noticeably, he believes, in The Buck in the Snow.<sup>57</sup>

Here, it would seem, was a turning point in Miss Millay's poetic career. This was the place at which she should have faced the task each creative artist faces at some point in his life, a task described

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<sup>54</sup>Op. Cit., p. 87.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>56</sup>Shopenhauer, as quoted by Tate, Op. Cit., p. 95.

<sup>57</sup>Dabbs, Op. Cit., p. 55.

by Miss Bogan as "conversion into self."<sup>58</sup>

Some critics were conscious of such a crisis in the career of the outstanding woman lyricist. Mr. Davison, in 1927, in his review of her opera libretto, "The King's Henchman," rejoiced: "That the author set herself such a tough artistic task suggests that she is not now content with the relatively fortuitous triumphs of her earlier work. She is prepared to face the vital problems concerning the intellectual organization of her poetic impulse."<sup>59</sup>

But Mr. Davison was optimistic, or rather he was psychologically unsound. The task was evidently one to which Miss Millay was temperamentally and intellectually unsuited. For, as far as the development of a mature poetic sensibility was concerned, Fatal Interview, her most ambitious work, did not represent an advance.

Harriet Monroe recorded her feeling of disappointment: "a feeling that this poet, equipped with the weapons of mastery is retreating from the free open country into an emotional reservation as seductive and remote as a cloister."<sup>60</sup>

Louise Bogan, too, noticed the difficulty which Miss Millay found in meeting the task of becoming a mature and self-sufficing woman and artist. In spite of the "maturity-beyond-her-years which her remarkable endowment threw, from time to time, into the current of her work,"

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<sup>58</sup> Bogan, Op. Cit., p. 278.

<sup>59</sup> Davison, Op. Cit., p. 682.

<sup>60</sup> Op. Cit., p. 217.

she never completely faced the problem, the critic observes. And in Fatal Interview, Miss Bogan explains, she dodged the issue by "basing the sonnets upon the immature impulse to experience beyond the limits of experience, to inflate the mortal passion of love into extravagant proportions."<sup>61</sup>

Mr. Dubois, whose psychology is not always orthodox, has an interesting explanation of this combination within a personality of unusual precocity with a reluctance to mature.

Precocity is self-centered, ego-centric. It feeds upon itself and is therefore apt to wear itself out ....The precocious run the risk of being merely precious, of clinging always to childhood toys, and of establishing nursery Zeitgeist like the Victorian. ...Precocity makes the child remarkable. It makes him odd or it makes him old. It makes the girl a woman. Setting one apart from the rest of the world, it emphasizes the importance of having individuality, increasing one's secret egoism or egotism....The ultimate consequence of such precocity may be a childless woman or an heirless man because, having become part of oneself, one's unusualness and one's sensitiveness about it continue beyond childhood. The consequence may be a spoiled child, a child upon whom much has been lavished, who has grown to expect this luxury as a right belonging to her existence as an unusual being and who, when she grows up and misses what she has come to expect, is perpetually willful, disappointed, on the lookout for Santa Claus to drop down crumbled chimneys. Miss Millay has not been unaffected in this manner.<sup>62</sup>

This may or may not explain the reason for Miss Millay's reluctance to accept experience. Certainly it sounds typical of the poet

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<sup>61</sup>Op. Cit., p. 278.

<sup>62</sup>Op. Cit., p. 84.

who always demanded of life why it thwarted her, instead of how it thwarted her.<sup>63</sup>

Important answers lay in her experience, Mr. Dabbs asserts, but instead of asking herself the questions, she denounces and laments; instead of quarreling with herself, she quarrels with the world--with the established order. Remembering Yeats' statement ("We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry"), the critic points it out as the explanation of an increasingly large proportion of rhetoric in the later poetry of Miss Millay.<sup>64</sup>

In her volume of 1935, Wine From These Grapes, Miss Bogan finds intermittent flashes of maturity: "The accent of chagrin and desperation, both resolved and unresolved, is there--the sound of bitter thought, of meditation, of solitude, of the clear disabused and unexcited mind."<sup>65</sup> Mr. Dabbs, too, feels this. He explains it:

...though Miss Millay has worried life, and herself, with all the wrong questions, she has come slowly, by means of her sensibility, to at least a deeper sympathy with men. Her self pity is more and more a pity for mankind...more and more she sees herself as symbolic...<sup>66</sup>

This had been a route open to her after "Renascence," Mr. Dabbs believes, for in the human pity that partly motivated that poem she could have found an attitude productive of a broader poetry. But,

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<sup>63</sup>Dabbs, Op. Cit., p. 62.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>65</sup>Bogan, Op. Cit., p. 278.

<sup>66</sup>Op. Cit., p. 62.

even in "Renaissance," he regrets, she fled from it.

Apparently, it was harder than even the critic imagined for Miss Millay because again she retreated. Of her next two volumes, one was partially dramatic and the other a translation. Nor did her return to the lyric vein in 1939, with Huntsman, What Quarry?, represent an advance in maturity or depth of sensibility.

Perhaps, partly, the answer to this inability to create a more universal and less self-centered, self-willed, selfish poetry lay within the difficulty of the period for the exercise of the poetic art. As Mr. Dabbs attempts to explain:

A modern sensibility, she feels the grief of life beating upon her, but her life is too separate, too uncertain of any place in the world (too modern), for her to move outward toward others on this tide of grief.<sup>67</sup>

Nevertheless, remembering from our initial study some poets who have met the challenge of conversion into mature artists even today, and of facing the actuality of experience in a confused age with only courage and the creative spirit, we must feel that (as with Brutus) the basic answer lay, not in her stars, but in herself.

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<sup>67</sup> Dabbs, Op. Cit., p. 63.

## CHAPTER IV

### HER TECHNIQUE AS A FACTOR IN HER WORK

It is interesting to observe that Edna St. Vincent Millay who is so typically a product of her age is nearest another age technically. She has been one of those who take the known forms that offer the readiest vehicle, technically and emotionally, and thus save themselves much loss of time, much doubt.<sup>1</sup>

Never an innovator, a "maker," she has not left language altered and disturbed, ready for new forms and sensibilities.<sup>2</sup> Instead, as Tate puts it, she merely transformed subtly to her own use the "indefinable average of poetic English."<sup>3</sup> He expands upon this observation:

Taking the vocabulary of nineteenth century poetry as pure as you will find it in Christina Rossetti, and drawing upon the stock of conventional imagery accumulated from Drayton to Housman, she has created out of shopworn materials, an interesting personal attitude: she has been able to use the language of the preceding generation to convey an emotion peculiar to her own....By making their language personal she has fought it back to life. This is her distinction. It is also her limitation.<sup>4</sup>

Ludwig Lewisohn comments upon her undoubted ability to make personal this heritage of poetic form. "She has used no form, hardly a

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<sup>1</sup>Flanner, Op. Cit., p. 163.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Op. Cit., p. 226.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 223.

turn of rhythm not consecrated by the long uses of English verse. Yet, at her frequent best, her voice is entirely her own, and more triumphantly so for the associations of long traditions she had first to resist and then to transmute."<sup>5</sup>

We are, of course, no less conscious of this obvious feature in her verse than are the critics whose testimony is quoted. However, of more interest to the student of her poetry than the characteristic itself, are such inquiries as: 1. Why did she so easily assume such an "intuitive ease" in the emotional style of an earlier and great period in literature? 2. How did she succeed in transmuting traditional materials into personal utterance? 3. How was her ability to do this a limitation? 4. How much did her technique contribute to the value of her poetry and to poetry in general?

Critics have concerned themselves at various times with reasons for Miss Millay's poetic traditionalism and have explained it as variously as their viewpoints.

Harold Cook, in his role as apologist, notices it and ascribes it to an intense poetic temperament, too lofty to concern itself with mechanics:

This concern with the emotional aspect of her art --rather than the formal--indicates an intense poetic temperament. In spite of a superlative command of her medium, it is clear that Miss Millay is less interested in craftsmanship and its problems than she is in the intrinsic poetry of her subject...it is this love for, this concentration

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<sup>5</sup>

Lewisohn, Op. Cit., p. 575.

upon, the poetry that accounts for the lack of that experimentation so characteristic of many of her contemporaries....A survey of her work shows no period disturbed by that preoccupation with formal experimentation so common among American poets of this generation (the men particularly), and which so often indicates an uncertainty of direction or a weakness of poetic power which both exhausts and reveals itself in a nervous attempt at strength.<sup>6</sup>

Miss Millay has undoubtedly avoided a pitfall of over-concern with novelty and experimentation which revealed weakness of inspiration in many of her contemporaries. However, to congratulate a poet upon neglect of form is, one would assume, analagous to congratulating an artist upon his disregard of brushes and paints in his concern with the beauty of his inward pictures.

Mr. Lewisohn, noticing, like Mr. Cook, experimentation among "the men particularly," has another explanation. He points out that almost all American women writing poetry (even to the youngest, Louise Bogan and Léonie Adams) have been "very conservative in respect of form and have depended for their effects on personal meaning and personal music poured into the immemorial and often into the very simplest patterns of English verse."<sup>7</sup> He generalizes upon this phenomenon: "It is, perhaps, not fantastic to see in this fact, the permanent and almost mystical conservatism of women, that blessedly remains beneath the rude experiments and violent doctrinal minds of even the most confused and turbulent age."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Cook, Op. Cit., p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Lewisohn, Op. Cit., p. 575.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.



It is to be feared that Mr. Ransom would agree with Mr. Lewisohn's generalization but with considerably different emphasis. Mr. Ransom would undoubtedly trace the employment of traditional mediums for strictly personal music to a deficiency in masculinity, or to the "poet as woman." For the critic has subscribed to an unfortunate use of the word "feminine" to indicate a negligible degree of intellectual resource or discipline. Thus he would argue that, because she is a woman in the worst sense of the word, Miss Millay is unable to command "intellectual power with some of the skills that come from the intellectual disciplines," and is limited, therefore, in her concepts of technique. Her poetry is consequently deprived of the treasures of intellectualism, for its field of reference is too wide to be commanded by "the innocent woman-mind or, for that matter, the man-mind which is not flexible enough to be at ease with its intellectual attainments."<sup>9</sup>

In spite of his misogynic figure, Mr. Ransom has certainly pointed out one factor basic to Miss Millay's recourse to the personal in poetry as well as to her inability to transmute her personal voice even had she so wished. Of course, from our study of her personality and sensibility, we realize that she did not wish to transmute her own voice, that she wished to express her own personal will. Indeed, she came to rely more upon the indefinite music of the speaking voice than upon even "the formal quality of song" as her career progressed. Dabbs would point this out as a double reason for her satisfaction with con-

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<sup>9</sup>

Ransom, Op. Cit., p. 98.

ventional methods of expressing her personal voice.<sup>10</sup>

Tate also stresses the lack of intellectual interest which permitted her satisfaction with her own adaptation of traditional styles.

Miss Millay's success with stock symbolism is precariously won. I have said that she is not an intellect but a sensibility: if she were capable of a profound analysis of her imagery, she might not use it: such an analysis might disaffect her with the style she so easily assumed, without necessarily leading her, as Yeats was led in mid-career, to create a new style of her own.<sup>11</sup>

It seems apparent that it was a concern with emotional attitudes, unaccompanied by intellectual power and its frequently concomitant introspective tendencies which make them suspect, that allowed Miss Millay to be satisfied with adapting to her own use conventional poetic apparatus.

However, it was also a lack of the kind of creative imagination possessed by a major poet. Tate demonstrates this in a brief analysis of her symbolism. Because in the greatest poets their imaginative focus goes beyond the purely personal emotion to an order of life, their symbolism acquires not only "a heightened existence but an independent existence of its own." He points out the difference in Miss Millay's use of symbols: "...we feel that she never penetrates to the depth of her symbols, but uses them chiefly as an external frame of reference, an adornment to the tale."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Dabbs, Op. Cit., p. 98.

<sup>11</sup> Tate, Op. Cit., p. 64.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

On the contrary, it is interesting to note the description of her images offered by her uncritical admirer, Harold Cook:

...they are...capable of painting vividly the picture the author desires, and their use is always significant in relation to the poem in which they occur. They illustrate; they never confuse, either by being inaccurate symbols of the emotion to be conveyed, or by a multiplicity which (as was the case, ironically enough, with the Imagists) outweighs the thought and defeats its purpose by mutually destructive metaphor or simile. One of the greatest weaknesses of contemporary poetry is its misuse of imagery. By a great artist images, however brilliant, are closed in his poem like jewels in a matrix,...<sup>13</sup>

Mr. Cook's praise and Mr. Tate's complaint describe the same type of imagery. Their reactions spring from different conceptions of the use of imagery in poetry.

In this connection it is instructive to return to Miss Benson's summary of modern critical thought upon this question:

In 1934 Day Lewis pointed out a trend toward "intensification" of imagery in the works of poets of his time; these poets presented their imagery without the addition of explanatory matter. It would seem that many of the critics of the period considered intensity the key-characteristic of twentieth century poetry, and, in fact, of all the best poetry--an "intense" experience so presented that the reader shares the excitement.<sup>14</sup>

Mr. Tate has this concentrated, intense imagery in mind as a criterion, while Mr. Cook is concerned with a different aspect. In general, then, it is not for lack of correctness or skill in use of

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<sup>13</sup>Op. Cit., p. 21.

<sup>14</sup>Op. Cit., p. 286.

imagery that the modern reviewer would criticize Miss Millay but for a misunderstanding of its function.

Thus Mr. Cook praises both "the simplicity of image, the extraordinary homeliness and unliterary quality of her nature and sea imagery" and "the increasingly frequent use of classical or traditional reference in symbols whose connotations have a renewed appeal in the poet's use of them...for they have all the freshness of a discovery; they are used as innocently and as unselfconsciously as the nature symbols..."<sup>15</sup>

And Mr. Tate can agree with Mr. Cook and those critics with the latter's standards, while still demanding more from a poet of genuine artistic stature. He analyses:

It has been frequently and quite justly remarked that Miss Millay uses her classical symbols better than any other living poet; we should add, I believe, that she uses them conventionally better. She takes them literally, subtracting from them only what serves her metaphor; whereas an even more "modern" poet like Yeats is capable ...of that violent addition to the content of the symbol as he finds it, which is the mark of great poetry.<sup>16</sup>

Mr. Tate helpfully compares the imagery of Miss Millay's final sonnet of her sequence Fatal Interview, the "Endymion" sonnet, with that of W. B. Yeats' famous sonnet, "Leda," to demonstrate the difference between a very fine conventional symbol and one marked by

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<sup>15</sup>Op. Cit., p. 22.

<sup>16</sup>Op. Cit., p. 224.

creative imagination. The difference, he concludes, is "first of all one of concentration and intensity, and finally a difference between an accurate picture of an emotion and an act of the imagination."<sup>17</sup>

Speaking of the same "Endymion" sonnet, Ransom finds Miss Millay's imagery faulty in it, even as conventional and illustrative. Indeed, he proves at some length that it is modeled after the early Keats' manner, stressing music and atmosphere at the expense of logic and "good sense."<sup>18</sup>

Nor is this the only instance of literary antecedents which have left their mark, especially upon the more studied verse of Miss Millay. The natural corollary of traditional verse is literary derivation. It becomes a matter of interest to observe the extent to which such a poet succeeds in transmuting this influence into personal utterance. This is especially the case with Miss Millay whom Ransom calls, in at least one division of her work, "a traditionalist with the highest literary standards in her consciousness."<sup>19</sup>

Here is one valuable contribution which Miss Atkins, the over-enthusiastic Boswell, makes toward a better understanding of our poetess. The biographer tracks down a "surprising multitude of first-class origins for the fine phrases," as even her reviewer admits, which are proof that Miss Millay has gone to school too faithfully and bears too

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<sup>17</sup> Tate, Op. Cit., p. 225.

<sup>18</sup> Ransom, Op. Cit., pp. 83-86.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

many distinguished derivations to lapse into a merely popular versifier.<sup>20</sup>

In the very first poem, "Renaissance," much less studied than any later work, Miss Atkins points out evidence of such influences as Virgil, Sappho, Shakespeare, Coleridge and Keats. In the early plays, "The Lamp and the Bell" and "Aria da Capo," she points out Fletcher, Webster and other Elizabethans as models. In Second April, Miss Atkins finds traces of Tennyson and Ovid equally evident. Moreover, she lists Sappho, Catullus, Chaucer, Donne, Herrick, Webster, Milton, Coleridge and Keats "also sustaining her style, not by plagiarism, and not by marquetry, but by subterranean nourishment and enrichment..."<sup>21</sup>

Nor were figures of the past her only models. Miss Atkins assures us that the sonnets of Rupert Brooke served as models for the early "Reedy's Mirror Sonnets." And we find one early enthusiast worried over the multiplicity of echoes appearing in Miss Millay's verse. Sister Madeleva in 1925 warns:

Another pitfall there is in the way of her flying feet, the trap of her own versatility. Already she has stumbled into it. She imitates with dangerous facility. She began in the manner of Anna Hempstead Branch; just now Robert Frost appears to be her model; a half dozen sonneteers and lyricists have come between....Her susceptibility extends to the form no less than the spirit in which she writes; she has followed conservatively in blank verse epigrammatic lyrics and excellent sonnets, the more erratic course of contemporary

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<sup>20</sup> Ransom, Op. Cit., p. 86.

<sup>21</sup> Op. Cit., p. 118.

American poetry along practically the same broad path. All of which is legitimate. It is more of a compliment than a criticism to importune her to blaze a trail that is her own, to speak, however haltingly, in a voice that is not an echo.<sup>22</sup>

Again in 1935 when the sonnet sequence, Fatal Interview, was published, the reviewer in The New York Times remarked that "This book is in the tradition of Petrarch, Sidney, Shakespeare and Dante Gabriel Rossetti." And Thomas Chubb comments upon the review: "Such a description is a little two-edged, for if it implies stature, it also hints at echoes. Both suggestions are true."<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, since she accepted the continuity of a traditional form, Miss Millay was writing in measures already possessing emotional associations for all readers. However, she was never a mere copyist. When she succeeds in making the sonnet a vehicle for the expression of her own personal emotion, she contributes to its form. Miss Flanner lists her contributions to the sonnet form:

She took the principle of surprise common to the final lines and developed it into a clever note of drama. She brought her own New England into the sonnet, the weeds and the weedy ocean. She gave to it, as to her other lyrics, homely and modern details and sometimes the grandeur of folk heroism....She brought to the sonnet the interest and ferment of conversation. She made the form sophisticated, versatile and highly feminine.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Sister Madeleva, "Where Are You Going My Pretty Maid," Chaucers Nuns and other Essays (New York, 1925), p. 149.

<sup>23</sup>Op. Cit., p. 175.

<sup>24</sup>Op. Cit., p. 163.

It was her personal energy that gave to her early lyrics "a sense of freshness and transparent revelation" to which her critics universally attest. Among these lyric forms she frequently took the traditional elegy and made it immediate and tender. In fact, Miss Flanner sums up her contribution to poetic method as "...in two directions: an infusion of personal energy and glow into the traditions of lyric poetry and the deceptively artless ability to set down the naked fact unfortified."<sup>25</sup>

However, as in most endeavors, artistic or practical, failure is very closely allied to success, so we are not surprised to find the poetic "vices" of Miss Millay the reverse phase of her "virtues."

Indeed, it is eventually her very excellence in handling of meter and technical detail which first gave critics cause for concern. In 1925, a commentator already worried: "She is always aware of her masterly art; she has counted the ten small words; they are never nine or eleven. This mathematical accuracy persists in her finest frenzy..."<sup>26</sup>

But later the disadvantages of technical excellence in traditional forms became more evident. Miss Flanner notes of her "Epitaph for the Race of Man" that, although the content of her work is changed, these sonnets still run as smoothly as perfect engines. She draws a moral from this:

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<sup>25</sup> Flanner, Op. Cit., p. 164.

<sup>26</sup> Wood, Op. Cit., p. 203.



That is the fate of the traditional measure, no matter how strong may be our sense of continuity in using it. It begins to alarm with the bland ease of the mechanical.<sup>27</sup>

The critic realizes the absurdity of requiring a poet to be less skillful than she is. She merely wishes a poet to be conscious of the limitations of such skill. She states the matter:

One does not ask Miss Millay to forego the exceptional command of her medium. Yet there could be possible an eloquence neither disinherited nor upstart, an eloquence closer to its own necessity than these sonnets are, a kind of language less dependent on the perfection of the form.<sup>28</sup>

It is apparent, too, that a poetry dependent upon the personal element to transmute traditional forms is limited by the vitality of the personal energy. Allen Tate declares that when the personal impulse weakens in a mind that cannot re-create a symbol or invent a style, the result is a "pastiche," a caricature of honest poetry. This critic asserts that the failures of such a talent are often defects in taste, while failures of a higher order of poetry are mere blunders.<sup>29</sup>

Certainly Miss Millay has been guilty of some such errors of taste. Her greatest weakness, technically, has been, from the very beginning of her career, a tendency to over-write and to over-decorate.

Reviewing her earliest work, a critic points out overdone phras-

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<sup>27</sup> Flanner, Op. Cit., p. 168.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Op. Cit., p. 226.

ing. This, he complains, resulted in a "forced fraying of the passion" which detracted from the undoubted authenticity of mood in such a poem as "God's World."<sup>30</sup>

Ransom discounts any genuine influence of Donne upon the poetry of Miss Millay partly for this reason. Of course, he points out the gulf between "an intellectualist poet" and a poet of personal emotion as one indication of Miss Atkins' error in attempting to trace an affinity between the poets. But he lays equal stress upon what he calls Donne's "realism" which, the critic declares, should make him a pattern for any type of poet. The critic defines this: "What he

Donne teaches is strength; or directness, and in that sense realism; a kind of shortness of speech, when there is in every poet an evil spirit persuading him to elaborate, prettify, ritualize everything that he approaches in love; an unprettiness."<sup>31</sup>

In this virtue Miss Millay fails to emulate Donne. Mr. Ransom points this out, citing several poems as examples. For instance, Miss Millay expressed one concept of Donne's, "We are tapers, too, and at our own cost die," in her little "Fig":

I burn my candle at both ends,  
It will not last the night  
But ah my foes, and oh my friends  
It gives a lovely light.

Ransom points to the last two lines of the quatrain "for their foolish ejaculations, so twinned, laboriously varied, and for the poverty of

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<sup>30</sup> Wood, Op. Cit., p. 204.

<sup>31</sup> Op. Cit., p. 81.

the vulgar 'lovely' as an example of the over-writing which made her expression of the idea inferior to Donne's. The critic declares:

To wish to make a thing look pretty or look smart is to think poorly of it in itself and to want it more conventional, and to try to improve it is to weaken and perhaps destroy it.<sup>32</sup>

Noticing this weakness of Miss Millay's poetic technique, Delmore Schwartz attempts to explain it. He declares:

Her diction, especially, is poetic in the wrong sense: the candles, "arrows," "towers," "scullions," "thou's," "lads," "girls," "prithies," "shepherds," and the often capitalized "Beauty" and "Death" are words which come, not from a fresh perception of experience, but from the reading of many lyric poems by the Elizabethans, Heine, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti.<sup>33</sup>

Nor, the critic warns, is the alternative a simple one of substituting electric lights for candles and machine guns for arrows. Sandberg tries this, Schwartz declares, and is as falsely poetic as Miss Millay. The critic perceives an alternative of genuine poetic value flickering in the poems where Miss Millay draws upon what she has actually looked at and heard on the New England coast or in the Maine woods.<sup>34</sup>

Ransom would probably agree, for he remarks that where Miss Millay is entirely or nearly original and contemporary, and less pretentious she is decidedly the more considerable as a poet.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ransom, Op. Cit., p. 81.

<sup>33</sup> Schwartz, Op. Cit., p. 736.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Op. Cit., p. 87.

If such defects of taste as over-writing and prettifying threatened her finest work it is not surprising to find in her less inspired work the critics complaining bitterly of "abuses that shout their presence":

They show in the reckless and machine turned Elizabethanism of her sonnet sequences (in which the decoration, as Mr. Dupree once noted, is less Tudor than Tudor City); in the Cecil de Mille extravagance of dinosaurs, volcanoes, constellations and "monstrous Nothings" of "The Race of Man"...<sup>36</sup>

In another element of her technique, Miss Millay exhibits the same twins of success and failure, to use Schwartz's figure of speech. Miss Millay's musicianship has been mistakenly overpraised by her biographer, Miss Atkins, who proceeds upon a fallacious notion of a poet's ability to suggest a thing by sound. However, if Miss Atkins was mistaken, as Mr. Ransom cleverly demonstrates, in her conception of the power of phonetic elements to suggest logical meanings, she was at least correct in her belief that Miss Millay is a competent musician, poetically speaking. Mr. Ransom is entirely willing to acknowledge "that she has an accomplished ear, and that means, among other things, ...an intelligent one without foolish ambition which, in order to secure its own delight does not have to set up in opposition to imagination."<sup>37</sup>

Miss Millay is probably completely innocent of her biographer's delusions of grandeur as to the function of sound patterns, but she is

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<sup>36</sup> Zabel, Op. Cit., p. 573.

<sup>37</sup> Op. Cit., p. 91.

sometimes guilty of a different exaggeration of the musical element in verse. Ransom points out that sometimes her preoccupation with it "seduces her poetic invention into acts of mere fancy."<sup>38</sup>

This is a third way in which Miss Millay differed from the practice of Donne, who Ransom asserts, "...even beyond any actual need to chop up music in order to keep the logic significant and delicate, seemed usually to aim at a little of musical discontinuity on principle, as a promise of good faith, for the reader and himself to go by." Here Miss Millay did not follow his example. Indeed, she sometimes assumed the nineteenth century habit of reversing Donne's practice by sacrificing the logic to the music. This, too, resulted in a parody of honest poetry. As an example of this in Miss Millay's poetry, Mr. Ransom points out the inconsistent imagery of the "Endymion" sonnet in the Fatal Interview sequence.<sup>39</sup>

In summing up an estimate of Miss Millay's technique as a factor in her career as a poet, we can make these contradictory statements without confusion. She was an exceptionally competent technician if not a creator. Without obscurity we can add that her unusual ability to make personal the traditional poetic forms and apparatus was at once her success and her limitation. And, if her work received benefits from the store of English Literature, enriched by great talents of the past, it suffered almost comparably the disadvantages of deriv-

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<sup>38</sup> Ransom, Op. Cit., p. 91.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

ative poetry. Finally, although she has been praised for attaching greater importance to poetic concepts than to poetic execution, it is significant that her vices, technically speaking, spring from an undue concern with sound and appearance.

Now, opinions of contemporary commentators upon her work having confirmed our preliminary impressions of the poet's technical successes and failures, and scholarly studies of critics having pointed out implications and significances in these observations for us, we can hope to proceed, better equipped, to a more minute and detailed examination of the poet's work.

## CHAPTER V

### A CRITICAL REVIEW OF HER POETRY: 1912-1946

#### Part I: 1912-1923

We have come a considerable distance from our first glance at a modern poetess whose national--even international--reputation brings her so forcibly to the attention of a student of the literature of the between-wars period. Indeed, at this point it seems expedient to review the steps by which we have arrived at a deeper understanding of our poet.

The first hasty glance at her career as reflected in contemporary journalism and critical magazines left us amazed not only by the volume of printed matter concerning the poetess but also by the violence and great variation of the opinions expressed therein. It was not difficult to perceive the outlines of a battle between her critics as to her merit, both sides of which found their most literate and erudite expression in the book-length biography of the poet and its review in 1935.

Assembling some basic literary criteria, and establishing a sketchy scale of standards of literary values based upon contemporary estimates of modern criticism, we re-read in their light the work of Miss Millay as well as the statements of her outstanding critics. At once we found ourselves spared the necessity of entering the fray, by reason of the perspective available to our generation. We were able,

without hesitation, to recognize Miss Millay as a minor poet, because of the limited range of experience and emotion she has embodied in poetry, because of the strictly personal and emotional character of her poetry and because of her failure to create an individual poetic idiom.

However, the poets to whom we accord the title of great or major are few. Among the reasons, one is the comparative rarity of poetic sensibilities endowed with creative imagination, controlled and enriched by broad intelligence, deepened by intense emotional sensitivity and also blessed with the character to face life and experience. Another is the difficulty of writing a universal poetry in ages where no common scheme of reference exists. A third reason is the test of time which reveals limitations in a work of art not apparent to contemporary and near-contemporary generations. All these and many more factors tend to decimate the ranks of those we term great or near-great major poets.

The majority of the poets of any age are minor. They fill a very necessary role in our literature which we recognized. This designation, however, has been used to indicate everything from popular versifiers such as Adelaide Proctor and Laetitia Landon to such pillars of the family library as Longfellow, Poe and Byron. We realized that to classify a poet as minor is only to indicate the scope or type of his work, not to indicate the degree of his achievement within that field.

Understanding, then, that to have recognized Edna St. Vincent



Millay as typically a minor poet was only a preliminary step in the study of her work and an evaluation of her success, we proceeded to other problems equally preliminary. The most interesting phenomena in her career is her overwhelming popularity. We studied the reasons for this as well as its unfortunate effect upon her work. Partly this popularity was based upon her unusual and striking personality. This made imperative an analysis of her personality as it was reflected in her poetry, our most authentic source of information.

However extrinsic to a study of poetry an analysis of the personality of the poet may be, it is very revealing as to the sensibility with which the poet faces the chaotic experiences of any life. This, in turn, determines the intelligence, sensitivity and fullness of the response to experience which the poet can compose by means of his creative imagination into inevitable forms.

With the aid of contemporary critics whose studies traced her personality as reflected in her verse at various stages in her career, we established outlines of a charming, very feminine girl with a flair for the dramatic which amounted to a vice in a poet. We found her not intellectual but very responsive to emotional stimuli, egocentric and passionately willful. So willful was she as to demand of life what she wanted rather than to ponder what it had to offer. This attitude we recognized, with the aid of Dabbs and Tate, as a very common evasion of a full reaction to experience, one which is productive not of growth and emotional maturity but rather of eventual frustration. Insofar as

such an attitude toward experience has been reflected in poetry, it has been classified as romantic irony. Indeed, this attitude, we discovered, is common enough in a type of poetry which numbers among its practitioners such distinguished figures as Byron and the modern Hart Crane.

We found ourselves possessed, then, of a degree of comprehension of the reasons for those limitations in the scope of Miss Millay's poetry by which we were able to recognize it as minor. However, understanding why a poetry isn't what it is not, is still some little distance from understanding what it is and why.

A step closer to the actual study of her poetry was our examination of Miss Millay's technique. Here we found the combination of success and failure which we summarized in the last chapter.

We come now to our final task, which was also our first step, an examination of that body of poetry which Miss Millay has produced throughout a period of over thirty years and which alone remains to future generations as testimony of her merit as a poet. In the light of our understanding of these factors involved in the poetry we can hope to read it now with greater critical discernment. Nevertheless, here we will concern ourselves primarily with her poetry, not as an expression of current theories, not as a revelation of personality, philosophy, or technical ability, but as poetry.

Of course, we will consult the impressions of more competent critics for their corrective and fertilizing effect upon our own reactions. However, we will hope to rely largely upon our own critical judgment, fortified by some simple standards for any poetry, major or

minor.

A few of such canons we list. From Richard Blackmur we borrow such demands as "composition in the conceiving imagination and...the twist and shape of idiom in the executive imagination of the poems..."<sup>1</sup> From Mr. Ransom we borrow the demand for intellectual maturity especially in poetry concerning themes which demand it.

Is it up to his (the critic's) mental age or general experience? And is there any nonsense in it? The last question concerns the competence of the poet to carry out her intention consistently whatever the limits of the intention. The devoted critic must maintain that poetry on whatever level must make as consistent sense as prose, and he does not like being committed in it to nonsense;...<sup>2</sup>

We add such requirements as complete sincerity of emotion and, subordinately, intensity and depth of feeling. We will seek clarity, concreteness, originality and complete sincerity in expression.

With this modest patchwork of standards in mind we read the lyric offerings of Miss Millay from "Renaissance" in 1912 to "There Are No Islands Any More" in 1942.

Renaissance is a slight little volume containing seventeen lyrics and six sonnets. Only three of the lyrics are of any length and all are of the simplest forms. It is a young girl's poetry of moods and fancies which would naturally fill the mind of a young girl.

Grief for a lost one is the emotion of "Interim" and the charming "When the Year Grows Old." The longer poem, "Interim," suffers

<sup>1</sup>Richard Blackmur, The Expense of Greatness (New York, 1940), p. 200.

<sup>2</sup>Ransom, Op. Cit., p. 79.

by reason of its length. In a mood of sorrow and loneliness, the poem tenderly addresses the lost one; but sorrow changes to a desperate questioning as to the hereafter, rebellion against traditional consolations and, finally, to a horror of meaninglessness and a frightened desire for faith. It is probably a faithful recording of a young girl's reactions to death, but it gives rather the impression of unselective notation than of the composition which is characteristic of the poetic imagination. Its execution is skillful but the poet's concern with technique mars the sincerity of her mood of sorrow as she makes a skillful acrostic. It is also marred by such over-dramatic phrasings as "God! God! God pity me! Am I gone mad/That I should spit upon a rosary?"<sup>3</sup> More successful because limited to a single mood is the brief, wistful, little memory, "When the Year Grows Old." Utterly unself-conscious, completely sincere, using the simplest of language and homely imagery, it is very appealing.

Sadness is the mood of "Sorrow," "Kin to Sorrow" and "Three Songs of Shattering." All three are undistinguished little lyrics in simple language, probably no better and no worse than similar poems written by young girls.

Fancies provided the themes for "Witch-Wife," "The Little Ghost," "Tavern" and "The Shroud." All naive conceptions, they are simply done.

Love of nature is the theme for "God's World" and "Afternoon on a

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<sup>3</sup>

Wood, Op. Cit., p. 203.

Hill." Much the more well known of the two, "God's World" is far the less worthy of notice. Its diction is marred by such outworn solisms as "thy thee stretcheth," "prithee," and "thou'st." Although the mood is undoubtedly authentic, its phrasing is so overdone as to give an impression of forced fraying of the passion.<sup>4</sup> This sense of strain is entirely wanting in "Afternoon on a Hill." Only twelve short lines, it conveys a youthful delight in nature:

I will be the gladdest thing  
Under the Sun!  
I will touch a hundred flowers  
And not pick one.

A young girl's impatience for love is the subject of "Indifference." But the picture of herself is a little selfconsciously cute. "The Dream" is a little love song. But love has gone in "Ashes of Life," a lyric which very accurately pictures the mood of sorrow. However, this is a very self-centered sorrow, a very petty sorrow. One commentator aptly calls it the "dramatic speech of a despair infinitely little."<sup>5</sup> However, such selfish absorption in personal moods is characteristic of immaturity and the expression of it is very well done.

Love has gone and left me--and the neighbors  
knock and borrow  
And life goes on forever like the growing of  
a mouse  
And tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, and  
tomorrow  
There's this little street, and this little  
house.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 204.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 205.

Such youthful sorrow leads most adolescents to thoughts of suicide. Miss Millay was no exception. She has one allegorical poem, "The Suicide," which teaches naively the Sunday-school lesson that life is a task by which we earn eternity. In this little poem the poet follows the child's conception of heaven and earth although her language is not that of a child. Ransom complains bitterly of the lack of intellectual maturity, indeed the infantilism, of such conceptions.<sup>6</sup> Viewed as a traditional sermon in verse it is well executed; as poetry it is entirely inadequate.

More mature is her earliest poem, "Renaissance." Ransom calls it "genuine, in the sense that it is the right kind of religious poem for an actual young girl of New England, with much rapture, a naïve order of images and a dash of hellfire vindictiveness."<sup>7</sup>

Completely sincere, it recounts with candid, concrete clarity of detail a mystic vision. First the poet becomes conscious of herself as a microcosmos of the universe. Overwhelmed by human sorrow she welcomes death. From this death she is recalled by a vision of natural beauty. She decides "God" lies in the beauty of nature. To her poem she attaches a short moral:

The World stands out on either side  
No wider than the heart is wide;  
Above the world is stretched the sky  
No higher than the soul is high.

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<sup>6</sup> Ransom, Op. Cit., p. 104.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

The poem is undoubtedly the record of an exalted mood. As a genuine rhapsody, the poem has its breathless immediacy and intoxication, but it also has its vagueness. The differences of interpretation reveal this. The poem has been called "an expression of pantheism,"<sup>8</sup> and "an estatic modern relocation of God."<sup>9</sup> We remember that one critic believes its theme is the personal identity which alone makes the universe significant.<sup>10</sup> This is doubtless drawn from the appended moral.

We have seen from our study of the poet's mind that this vagueness was partly due to her reluctance to fight with herself. She did not attempt to come to any definite conclusion. In fact, Dabbs has pointed out the duality in the mystic vision by which the poet, however unconsciously, was seeking escape, not understanding or endurance.<sup>11</sup>

However, the vagueness sprang also from the poet's discomfort when attempting to juggle abstractions. Mr. Davison demonstrates this by comparing Vaughan's vision of eternity with Miss Millay's to the latter's disadvantage. It is also betrayed by such verbal obscurities as the phrase, "Immensely made manifold" in which the resemblance between "manifest" and "manifold" has confused the poet.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Sister Mary James Power, Op. Cit., p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Wood, Op. Cit., p. 202.

<sup>10</sup> Davison, Op. Cit., p. 81.

<sup>11</sup> Dabbs, Op. Cit., p. 54.

<sup>12</sup> Davison, Op. Cit., p. 675.

Although the expression is attractive for its simplicity and concrete clarity, it is marred even in this poem by such "girlish pretty-prettytyness" as:

The sky, I thought is not so grand  
I 'most could touch it with my hand

Here, of course, the execution does not sustain the thought.

Nevertheless, no poet, major or minor, need be ashamed of writing such a poem at eighteen and nineteen years of age. If it betrays immaturity in the vagueness of its thought, it has the charm of youthful freshness and simplicity. And if the poet seeks to forget and to escape rather than to ponder, she at least is on the side of the angels with her universal self-identification.

Of the six sonnets which close the volume, four are love sonnets. Although these sonnets are correct they are not so individual as her later work with this form. One, however, is probably among the best she has written. Entirely colloquial, "If I should learn in some quite casual way" succeeds in expressing by its very understatement the numb shock of losing a loved one.

The second volume upon our bookshelf of Miss Millay's work, A Few Figs From Thistles, lacks the naïve sincerity of Renascence, but does not gain appreciably in maturity. Admittedly light verse, it must still be held responsible for an adult viewpoint. Humor, more than any other attitude demands a broad tolerance, sanity, and perception of human idiocy, frailty and often pathetic nobility.

From a very competent critic we borrow the expression of our



standard for light verse:

In the best light verse the outward moorings of composition come all provided in the verse forms as traditionally used and instinctively modified --as we see in Rochester and Herrick. There remains, however, an indefeasible need for serious composition in the conceiving mind of the poet. To maintain gaiety at a definite level of taste is as difficult and requires as much composed unity of approach and as mature an attitude towards the material as is required to maintain fury or disgust. Light verse may be as bad as bad tragedy. Taste being educable, varies with the generations; and poor schooling produces fatuous self-confidence that the "rechaufé," in light verse as in the hash of life, will show organic warmth.<sup>13</sup>

To do her justice, Miss Millay was not guilty of re-hashing the light verse of other periods although her "Fig," "Thursday" ("And if I loved you Wednesday / Well what is that to you?"), and her sonnets, "I shall forget you presently, My Dear" and "O, Think not I am faithful to a vow," are echoes of such Restoration poems as Lord Rochester's:

Then talk not of inconstancy  
False Hearts and broken vows  
If I by miracle can be  
This live-long minute true to thee  
'Tis all that heaven allows.

Davison notes that Miss Millay's rakishness suffers by such a comparison; for her's is a naïve naughtiness.<sup>14</sup>

Actually her verses are a series of flip retorts springing from a mood of rebellion, rather than either wit or humor. They express a foot-stamping mood, common enough to each of us at times. However,

<sup>13</sup> Blackmur, Op. Cit., p. 201.

<sup>14</sup> Op. Cit., p. 674.

they are not even intended to express a synthesis of the opinions or a full view of the author. Thus they do not show the mastery of material characteristic of composed verse.

The "First Fig," "My Candle burns at both ends," as we have already noted in our analysis of her technical faults, is marred by an over-pretty expression which vulgarizes it.<sup>15</sup> A gospel of impulse, declaring the joy of castles in the sand, is the second epigrammatic "Fig." "Thursday" declares a woman's right to be inconstant. "To the Not Impossible Him" is another version of this thought. We noticed in our analysis of her attitude toward life the implications of the mood of this little poem, maturely meditated. However, the poet has not pondered it; she has merely lightly recorded her distrust of love and time.

"The Penitent" ("I had a little sorrow / Born of a little sin") and the ballad, "She is Overheard Singing" ("Oh Prue, she has a patient man, and Joan, a gentle lover, / And Agatha's Arth is a hug-the-hearth, / But my true love's a rover.") are spoiled by what Zabel calls "maddening coyness"<sup>16</sup> and an early commentator aptly described "a veil of quaintness."<sup>17</sup> In either case it reveals self-consciousness with which sincerity cannot co-exist. A delight in the quaint and time-honored properties of folk poetry is indulged at the expense of good taste in the ballad "The Singing Woman from the Wood's Edge." Davison calls it in fact the poorest kind of sensational romanticism. He is

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<sup>15</sup> See Chapter IV, p. 68.

<sup>16</sup> Op. Cit., p. 573.

<sup>17</sup> Wood, Op. Cit., p. 212.

further appalled to notice the dubious invention of a female leprechaun!<sup>18</sup>

"Grown-Up," "Midnight Oil," "The Un-Explored," and "The Prisoner" are rejoinders which have been made by every sixteen-year-old of every generation. "The Merry Maid" dramatizes the typical youthful "heart-break."

A rather charming whimsey, "To S. M. if he should lie a dying," pictures the poetess jealous of the great sirens of history even in the grave. Another such graceful posture is "Daphne." "To Kathleen" is lifeless and nonedescript. "The Philosopher" is a wry, good-humored rebellion against the ties of love.

A descriptive picture of a street in the slums of New York as a pair of lovers stroll by is offered in "MacDougall Street." However, only the ballad, "Recuerdo," genuinely captures the atmosphere of youthful love and rejoicing as two lovers ride back and forth all night on the ferry. It is as alive today as it was when written. Only such minor flaws in execution as the archaic "Good morrow mother!", which is out of place, spoils the general effect. "Portrait By a Neighbor" is a charming character sketch, sincere, truthful, concrete, along with a humorous affection and appreciation that is endearing. It remains a favorite of mine.

Of the four sonnets which close this volume all are love sonnets, but they reveal the uncertain attitude toward love and a lover that is

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<sup>18</sup> Davison, Op. Cit., p. 679.

characteristic of her early poetry. Sonnet One defies love and begs for it; sonnet two wonders if she would have loved him; sonnet three and four celebrate inconstancy. We have noted that the poet feared and distrusted love even while she sought it. Such a wavering, unless synthesized, is not productive of good poetry.

The volume as a whole, then, is immature, naïvely naughty, often self-consciously cute, redeemed only by its youthful exuberance. Its success as we have noted was based on other than poetic values.

Second April appearing a year later, while not consistently mature, seldom exhibits the straining for effect of its predecessor. A volume of thirty-two lyrics and twelve sonnets, it contains some of the poet's best work.

The opening lyric, "Spring," conveys a mood of discouragement, even despair, as the poet feels the inadequacy of natural beauty to give meaning to life or to distract from the inevitable death. The first lines,

To what purpose April, do you return again?  
Beauty is not enough,...

contain the theme. However, though as the record of a mood it is legitimate, yet we feel it as much an emotional reaction or exaggeration as the "carpe diem" mood of the "Figs." Nor do we find any evidence of the workings of the poetic imagination in such blank despair as:

Life in itself is nothing,  
An empty cup, a flight of uncarpeted stairs.

Several short lyrics of appreciation of natural beauty are attractive. "Pastoral" is a charming little picture; "Low-Tide," "Eel-Grass,"

and "Exiled" are vivid sketches of the Maine sea-coast. They are characterized by perfect, minute coloring and detail. "Inland" should have been of this type. It expresses nostalgia for the seashore but it is spoiled by exaggeration of the emotion, by what Davison calls a "neurotic hyperbole":

Screaming to God for Death by drowning  
One salt taste of the sea once more.

This, he declares, is to lay on the passion with a trowel and to suggest strain and inadequate impulse.<sup>19</sup>

However, this sense of strain is entirely lacking in the beautiful little "Song of Second April" which is utterly simple and, by understating the mood, succeeds in conveying it. Davison calls it probably her most perfect lyric from all points of view.<sup>20</sup> "The Death of Autumn," too, succeeds in capturing the atmosphere of the season, while "Wild Swans" does not succeed in conveying either atmosphere or mood.

"Passer Mortuus" is a quiet statement of the transiency of life and love as is "Mariposa." Both are rather flat upon re-reading, thus betraying a lack of any great realization of their mood by the poet. The quietness is not one of depth of feeling. "Elegy Before Death" seems to indicate a depth of feeling not perceptible in the poem itself.

"Doubt No More That Oberon" looks back to a sort of golden age of nymphs, fauns and fays. Even an early commentator calls it a juvenile wisdom which yields to an illusion of an imagined perfect age, which

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<sup>19</sup> Davison, Op. Cit., p. 680.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

sees in its own time only this "dourest, sorest Age man's eye has looked upon."<sup>21</sup> Mr. Tate would call it typical of the search of the romantic for evasions of accepting reality.<sup>22</sup>

Recalling the immature little sermon in verse, "The Suicide," we are not as surprised as we would otherwise be to discover the naïve dramatization of the day of judgment, "The Blue Flag in the Bog." It is amazing to find a poet who has registered herself as a neo-pagan availing herself in this little parable of all the properties of the child's christian tradition. In it she tells how the narrator witnessed the burning up of the earth, and had to run back at great risk to rescue a poor blue-flag in a bog, but took God's hand and got his special permission to set the plant out and make a little private garden for it in Heaven. We borrow Ransom's caustic summary of the plot because his indignation at its infantile conception is amusing. He fumes: "I do not think any obligation can be upon the male adult requiring him to assist at this sort of thing, or, if he must, to smile other than untenderly, though God's smile was tender."<sup>23</sup> Undoubtedly Miss Millay had in mind an allegorical exposition of her frequent conviction that only natural beauty is of real importance on earth. However, her use of a child's manner and of unrelieved and unbelievable, hackneyed fragments of Christian legend was unfortunate. Only great

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<sup>21</sup>Wood, Op. Cit., p. 208.

<sup>22</sup>Op. Cit., p. 97.

<sup>23</sup>Op. Cit., p. 104.

intensity of feeling or a thought of simplicity and profundity could have made such a device pleasing. These elements are not present.

"The Beanstalk" is more successfully a child's poem because it is just that. A vivid narration of Jack's climb up the beanstalk, it conveys perfectly the swaying, reeling, dizzy sensation.

Less successful because more pretentious, the longest poem in the volume, "Ode to Silence" is heavily classical, borrowing the mythology of classical Greece, and the form of the traditional ode, Miss Millay writes of a tenth Muse, the Muse of Silence "sown of Zeus upon a dream of death." It is a poem preëminently musical, reminiscent of Tennyson. The poet cries "for utter annihilation, a longing for a final and dreamless death wherein the noises of the world shall at last cease to jangle in the brain."<sup>24</sup> This is, of course, another search for escape, a mood experienced by each of us. However, as an expression of a personal mood, it suffers by its cumbersome machinery and a sort of straining for effect.

A personal mood much more pleasingly and humanly presented is "Travel" wherein the restless poet declares:

My heart is warm with the friends I make,  
And better friends I'll not be knowing,  
Yet there isn't a train I wouldn't take,  
No matter where it's going.

This is a very slight and completely unmeditated personal mood but it is simply and vividly conveyed. Because everyone has experienced it

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<sup>24</sup>As paraphrased by Atkins, Op. Cit., p. 114.

at some time and in some degree, it has a universal appeal.

What Ransom calls a "charming feminism" is expressed in "The Poet and His Book." Again a personal desire--a wish common to most artists --to live for posterity in her work is expressed vividly, simply and concretely by the poet. The language is simple and unaffected; the imagery is concrete and homely. As Mr. Ransom declares, "Many poets must have hoped that their verse will confer immortality upon them, but I believe only Miss Millay sees such a vague consummation in a series of precise and living actions."<sup>25</sup>

Five little elegies are included in a section called "Memorial to D. C." In memory of a college friend, they are both sincere and tender. However, in "Epitaph," the first short six-line elegy, Davison says that the elegaic pace is forced. The poet has said:

Heap not on this mound  
Roses that she loved so well;  
Why bewilder her with roses,  
That she cannot see or smell?  
She is happy where she lies  
With the dust upon her eyes.

The critic complains of the ambiguity of bewildering a dead person who can neither see nor smell. He believes such slips are not infrequent where the poetic substance is attenuated or where the poet strains to escape the prosaic. They spring from a principle of the poet's of firing a verbal rocket to distract attention from the context, he claims. Another such ambiguity, he believes, can be pointed out in the poem

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<sup>25</sup> Ransom, Op. Cit., p. 106.



called "Elegy" where the poet says:

Let them bury your big eyes  
In the secret earth securely,

Here, he believes, she is trying to say more than needs to be said.<sup>26</sup>

However, in spite of the first lines the poem is a very lovely elegy. Ransom, although he feels the poem very feminine, remarkably enough finds it pleasing too. He declares:

The dead friend is gone, and the poet inconsolable but on a peculiar and, to a man, arbitrary ground. The poet cherishes an auditory and not a visual image. Other visions will replace the dead girl's beauty but no sound will compensate for the voice. I have the feeling that this is a legitimate and rather exquisite fixation though I had not encountered it.

He quotes in part:

Let them bury your big eyes  
In the secret earth securely,  
Your thin fingers and your fair,  
Soft indefinite-colored hair,--  
.....  
But your voice,--never the rushing  
Of a river underground,  
Not the rising of the wind  
In the trees before the rain,<sup>27</sup>  
.....

"Prayer to Persephone" is equally tender. Although it borrows the classic mythology of the other world, the spirit is a simple wish to insure the happiness of a loved one. "Dirge" and "Chorus" are merely songs of no distinction.

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<sup>26</sup> Davison, Op. Cit., p. 679.

<sup>27</sup> Ransom, Op. Cit., p. 105.

Twelve love sonnets close the book. Like her later sequence, Fatal Interview, they relate the progress of a love that is not to last. They abound in classical allusions and images. In the first, the poet merely senses that passion may soon enter to change the relationship between friends; however, it will be a passion worthy of such company as Isolde and Guinivere and Francesco. The second declares that "Longing alone is singer to the lute." The third describes the joy of loving in terms of pagan ceremonials. The fourth already shows memory supplanting love: "Only until this cigarette is ended." The fifth sonnet is probably the best of the group because of the intensity of the emotion. Significantly enough, it is simple in expression and imagery. Nor is the phrasing exaggerated. It is an intense and bitterly sincere statement that "a treacherous messenger, the thought of you comes to destroy me." While entirely personal, the experience is common enough in some form or another to most people. In one sonnet, the sixth, the poet compares her love to the love of Lesbia and Lucrece. But the final sonnet is a farewell and a revelation of the poet's conception of love, "all the puny fever and frail sweat of human love." It is this sonnet that one critic calls a "fierce Manichean denunciation of the body and the poor joys it has to offer." Far from being a frank acceptance of the facts of life, he declares, it is actually a rebellion against sex.<sup>28</sup> As a rebellion, however, the poem is invested with a personal vigor and intensity.

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<sup>28</sup> Anonymous, Op. Cit., p. 83.

The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems contains five parts: the first two contain various lyric forms; the third, some experiments in free verse; and the last two, sonnets.

There is an increase of dramatic or narrative lyrics. "A Visit to the Asylum" relates a child's impression of the inmates of an insane asylum where she is taken to visit. Evidently a memory, it is told with simplicity, and complete lack of either sentimentalism or sensationalism. Thus, modest as is the effect striven for, it is completely achieved. Much more sensational is the major tragedy conveyed in outline in the eight lines of "Humoresque." The whole drama of a novel or a play is sketched skillfully enough. However, there is no attempt at mood, atmosphere or interpretation. Perhaps a cynical appreciation of the common habit of underestimating the sophistication and capacity for living of the adolescent would be as close as one could come in estimating the attitude of the poet toward her subject matter. However, in general, the little lyric smacks more of the theatrical than of a mature appreciation of the simplicity of the greatest tragedies. Its execution is faulty, as one critic observes, in so far as the versification is careless. He quotes in proof the lines:

"Heaven bless the babe!" they said  
 "What queer books she must have read!"  
 (Love, by whom I was beguiled,  
 Grant, I may not bear a child.)<sup>29</sup>

More effective as a narrative is "The Pond" which is atmospheric

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<sup>29</sup> Kreymborg, Op. Cit., p. 444.

and utterly devoid of sentimentality. Standing beside a pond in the country, the poet remembers a story connected with it. A farmer's daughter who was jilted had drowned herself for love in that very spot. The poet successfully, though heartlessly enough, conveys the girl's foolish, romantic self-dramatization even as she actually committed suicide. Because of the poet's habit of overstatement, one critic finds this poem "a relief" in that "it makes its point so gently and unobtrusively."<sup>30</sup> Not so restrained is "The Departure" which is a dramatic presentation of a maiden in distress. However, it does not suffer from the theatricality of its emotion since the surprise concluding verse places it in perspective as the quiet mood of desperation of a girl sewing. This poem to my mind is not as effective as "The Pond" because of the utter detachment of the poet. She simply presents a picture without having formed any attitude toward it.

"The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver," the longest of the dramatic poems, is not so objective. The devoted and indefatigable Mr. Cook calls it "an arresting example of contemporary ballad-writing, never attempting an imitation of old ballads....but creating from the plainest colloquialisms a presentation of mood and story analogous to that of the older ballads." We borrow his excellent summary of the poem: "The theme of mother love is rendered without too great an emphasis and carries without difficulty the additional allegory of the child, who, ragged and cold, is clothed from the loom of the harp strings, and

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<sup>30</sup>

Davison, Op. Cit., p. 678.

warmed, at length by an instrument of song." However, even Mr. Cook, who is one of Miss Millay's most uncritical admirers, finds the poem "somewhat perilously balanced on the brink of sentimentality"--somewhat "specious" in comparison with more realistic offerings.<sup>31</sup> The naïve little tale makes one remember "The Blue Flag in the Bog" and "The Suicide."

Two slight poems are also ballads, "The Curse" and "The Return from Town." The first is a flip little fancy of an unusual revenge. The poet pictures her cremated ashes blowing on the winds and finally settling in the roots of the plants of her enemy. She concludes:

But I'll be a bitter berry  
In your brewing yet.

"The Return from Town" turns a little compliment to a husband who is "...such a man as any wife / Would pass a pretty lad for." Both of these little ballads are light and attractive but betray a little of the "cute."

The lyrics sing variations of the same themes as those of the first volumes. Three concern aspects of beauty: "My Heart, Being Hungry" declares that the poet find beauty everywhere; "Autumn Chant" asserts that beauty changes but always exists; "The Wood Road" declares that beauty is a solace in grief. Three concern nature: "The Dragonfly" is the imagined song of the insect; "Scrub" is a monologue of a gnarled, stunted tree from which an analogy may be drawn of a person

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<sup>31</sup>  
Op. Cit., p. 24.

misunderstood and hurt in youth. "The Goose-Girl" is the most pleasing of the three. In this poem, in a description of the simplicity of the coming of Spring, the poet declares:

And all the loveliest things there be  
Come simply, so it seems to me.

This intuition the poet sometimes forgot. "The Feast" also has a theme unusual for the poet: "I come upon no wine / So wonderful as thirst." However, the theme is merely expressed. It is not conveyed with any depth of feeling or intensity which would lend it conviction and thus distinction. The lyric "Souvenir" is unfortunate. Even Mr. Cook finds it "obvious and facilely sentimental."<sup>32</sup> It reminds me of a hit-parade song lyric:

Why do I remember you  
As a singing bird?

The group of poems in free verse are described by one commentator, Alfred Kreyborg, as "an unsuccessful experiment," although he excepts from this condemnation "Never May The Fruit Be Plucked."<sup>33</sup> His judgment is supported by later criticism. In 1940 her free verse is described as "oddly desultory" by Dr. Zabel who further declares that she has never shown the slightest conception of its uses.<sup>34</sup>

The little lyric, "Never May The Fruit Be Plucked," cries that one must take love when and where one finds it and never hope to make

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<sup>32</sup> Cook, Op. Cit., p. 23.

<sup>33</sup> Kreyborg, Op. Cit., p. 444.

<sup>34</sup> Zabel, Op. Cit., p. 575.

it last.

The winter of love is a cellar of empty bins,  
In an orchard soft with rot.

The analogy of gathering fruit in the orchard is skillful and familiar; the language is simple and homely. Here again, we notice the poet's utter distrust of love--her refusal to invest it with anything beyond "the puny fever and frail sweat" of passion. It is a statement of "carpe diem" which reveals her distrust of the future and of time. "The Concert" is another of her poems which concern her ever-present notion of a dichotomy between love and art--between love and beauty--as between the body and the spirit. It is one side of the conversation in which the poet tells her lover she must go alone to the concert. The description of the music is good.

Of the others in this group none are distinguished. "Hyacinth" is a little monologue of unrequited love. "To One Who Might Have Borne A Message" is the poet's wish that she might send a message to a loved one "now two years dead." "Siege" is a slight picturing of the notion that we all play with toys in life while death comes inexorably. "The Cairn" describes the mountain of knowledge. "Spring Song" is ambiguous in point and in manner. Presumably playful, the poet declares there will be no more spring. She is by turns arch as in "Better keep an eye out for you-know-who" and brusque as "Oh well --hell, it's all for the best." "Memory of Cape Cod" is a confused attempt apparently to convey atmosphere of the sea shore as the poet declares her nostalgia.

In part four there are twenty-two sonnets. In these sonnets, the industrious Mr. Cook tells us, begin the analysis of love which is continued in Fatal Interview. He says of them with his customary enthusiastic eulogy: "in the work of no other poet do we find so frankly set down, so honestly, so humanly, so nobly expressed the emotions of profane love."<sup>35</sup> We can certainly agree that one finds in the poems passion in all its phases. Kreymborg summarizes the series as:

...love in the midst of separation and love treated with a newer and angrier flippancy. "Love's bitter crust" is devoured and the dust embraced. "I know I am but summer to your heart" accepts the worm at the core. The furious sonnet, "Oh, oh, you will be sorry for that word!" closes on the famous line: "I shall be gone and you may whistle for me!" In another poem the world "will know I love you whether or not I do." A poem in which the poet plays to her large audience, "Sonnet XVIII" is a parade of bedtime sardonicisms. The next is that Swinburnian confession which so many women readers have lived through vicariously, "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why."<sup>36</sup>

Naturally we can agree as to the unusual frankness. Such a sonnet as XVIII, "I being born a woman and distressed," as Davison expresses it, "disrobes all reticence." Although the critic finds it "sordid," he grants that it is "well done and has a ring."<sup>37</sup> Actually, of course, it amounts to a vivid description of physical passion which the poet holds in as low an esteem as in Second April when she scorned

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<sup>35</sup> Cook, Op. Cit., p. 25.

<sup>36</sup> Kreymborg, Op. Cit., p. 444.

<sup>37</sup> Davison, Op. Cit., p. 676.



"the puny fever and frail sweat of human love." In this sonnet she strikes a rakish pose and declares:

I find this frenzy insufficient reason  
For conversation when we meet again.

However, Davison complains that such a poem fails entirely to sustain the balance of pleasure as poetry should.<sup>38</sup> Certainly it is a concentration of experience into verse, but it is experience in its rawest form of sensual apprehension untouched by the workings of poetic imagination.

Sonnet XIX, "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why" is equally frank. Schwartz believes this view of love is influenced by the eternal feminism of a day when woman's suffrage was an issue and not yet an amendment. Miss Millay compares the female protagonist of the poem to a tree and the "unremembered lads" who were her lovers to birds. Schwartz remarks that if one has a weakness for visualizing images, the dominant image of the poem presents the female and the lads in unfair proportions. The poet seems to feel that a love affair is not any the less true love because it has been rapidly succeeded by several more love affairs. This, the critic declares, is not really the kind of attitude which makes great poetry. Is it not, indeed, he inquires, just as shallow as its opposite, the squeezable mindless doll whom Hemingway celebrates?<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>

Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>

Schwartz, Op. Cit., p. 735.

The sonnets also celebrate beauty wherever it is discovered. Sonnet XX, "Still will I harvest beauty where it grows," seeks beauty even in a city dump. This is an entirely pleasing and satisfying sonnet. Largely descriptive, its theme is simple:

I tell you Beauty bears an ultra fringe  
 Ungessed of you upon her gossamer shawl!

Sonnet XII, "What's this of death from you who never will die?" also concerns beauty, the human beauty of a loved one which the poet sees as a tribute to its creator. This has often been spoken of as a great sonnet. However Ivor Richards, in his study of literary judgment, used it as one of his experimental "protocols" which he offered to a number of selected readers for criticism. The concensus of opinion seemed to be that the poem plays for easily-touched-off and full-volumed response and therefore is in danger of sentimentality. One opinion describes it:

This one offers cheap reassurance in what is to most men a matter of deep and intimate concern. It opens with Browning's brisk no-nonsense-about-me directness and goes on with a cocksure movement and hearty alliteration. It contains (along with the appropriate "dust to dust") echoes of all the best people. It is full of vacuous resonances ("its essential self in its own season") and the unctuously poetic.<sup>40</sup>

Certainly it gives no impression of the depth of feeling born of meditation or intuition which so great and basic a theme deserves.

Sonnet XXII, "Euclid alone has looked on Beauty bare," is another poem which sentimentally points out beauty--this time in higher mathematics. It has always been too popular--more than it has deserved.

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<sup>40</sup>

Richards, Op. Cit., p. 78.

Sonnet VI, "Pity me not because the light of day," is another statement of the transience of love and beauty. It is appealing although the expression of its sentiment is a little romanticized, largely because of its wry acceptance.

Pity me that the heart is slow to learn  
What the swift mind beholds at every turn.

Part five contains the series of seventeen false sonnets (the last line of each is lengthened to seven feet) known as the "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree." This sequence represents a departure for the poet. Probably with Frost as a model, Miss Millay paints a genre picture, a New England scene. For the first time in the sonnet form she writes a dramatic narrative rather than a personal experience. It lacks the passionate drive of the more personal sonnets but it is a well-knit narrative. We borrow the industrious Mr. Cook's summary of the sequence:

The story of a wife who, loving him not at all, returns to her husband, as he lies dying, who cleans the neglected house, who sits alone, proud, avoiding even the grocer's boy, awaiting the death of this man who "had come into her life when anybody would have been welcome, so in need was she," is set down with an accuracy, a colorless and toneless quality that convey painfully the woman's numb, inarticulate conflict, her relentless sense of duty and her fright.<sup>41</sup>

The use of the sonnet form for narrative may be open to question and the poems are not uniformly well executed. Nevertheless, the atmosphere of New England farm life is painfully vivid and pervasive.

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<sup>41</sup>

Cook, Op. Cit., p. 29.

The poet's minute observation and fidelity to detail is admirable.

The language is utterly simple and the imagery drawn entirely from the local scene. Such pictures as these are completely successful:

A wagon stopped before the house; she heard  
The heavy oilskins of the grocer's man  
Slapping against his legs. Of a sudden whirred  
Her heart like a frightened partridge,...

and

Across her teeth the grinding of a backing wagon wheel.

and

To gather in, before the line gave way,  
Garments, board stiff, that galloped on the blast

and

She had kept that kettle boiling all night long,  
for company.

and

The axe was nodding in the block...

The sequence does not wrestle with ideas or assume attitudes; it vividly paints a picture, creates an atmosphere, and outlines a story. One is inclined to agree with the comment of Sister Madeleva in 1925: "... 'Sonnets of an Ungrafted Tree' are the best good work, the nearest great work she has done."<sup>42</sup> However, one makes the reservation of restricting "great" to the sense of carrying out successfully the intention of the poet rather than of great poetry with its implications of insight into universal human values.

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<sup>42</sup>

Op. Cit., p. 156.

This volume of 1923, containing the Pulitzer Prize winning ballad from which it took its title, marks the end of the earliest period of Miss Millay's career as a literary artist. Like most youthful beginnings it is a period marked both by the exuberance and freshness of reaction to stimuli that are typical of youth and by the excesses and tentative qualities which are equally typical. In it, nevertheless, we have found most of the elements which we have studied as characteristic of her poetry. In it, moreover, she has already secured the wide reputation and considerable popularity which are to mark her entire subsequent career.

## PART II: 1923-1935

For the years between 1923 and 1928, we find on our shelf of Miss Millay's volumes little to concern us as critics of her poetry. There are the poetic plays: Aria da Capo (1924), The Lamp and the Bell (1924) and the collection called Three Plays (1926); there are the slim prose offerings: Distressing Dialogues (1924), a volume of light essays published under the pseudonym, Nancy Boyd, and Fear (1927), a pamphlet; and there is the unusual and outstanding libretto for Deems Taylor's opera, The King's Henchman.

The next volume which we will consider is The Buck in the Snow of 1928. A group of thirty-six short lyrics and seven sonnets, it is noticeably more serious and austere in tone than the volumes of her earlier period, but it has no theme or mood not expressed in some form in earlier volumes.

However, we can observe a growing pre-occupation with death. This is especially brought to our attention by the first lyric, "Moriturus," a poem of fierce rebellion against the oblivion of death. The poet cries:

Withstanding Death  
Till Life be gone,  
I shall treasure my breath,  
I shall linger on.

I shall bolt my door  
With a bolt and a cable;  
I shall block my door  
With a bureau and a table;

With all my might,  
 My door shall be barred.  
 I shall put up a fight,  
 I shall take it hard.

Here is a poem which records a mood of undeniable intensity with complete sincerity, stark simplicity and clarity of expression. Upon a theme of universal concern, it undoubtedly reflects the mood most characteristic of the poet's genuine attitude toward death and life. And, in marked contrast to the hollow resonances of such a stereotyped poem as the sonnet, "What's this of Death from you who will never die?", this poem is vibrantly alive with the passionate conviction of the poet. Yet we cannot feel that this is great poetry. We can read it with sympathy for the valor of the hopeless resistance of the poet, but it is the sympathy we give to the personal confession of another. We cannot make its utterance our own, as we gratefully can with the words of greater poets of death.

A short paragraph written by Richard Blackmur in his discussion of another minor poet whose conception of death as oblivion was similar to that of Miss Millay's helps us to understand an inadequacy which we have dimly perceived. The critic states:

A poet's treatment of death is one test of his magnitude and perhaps the best test of his maturity. To complete the test of Housman in these respects, we have only to remind ourselves of other and positive conceptions of death: in Dante and Leopardi, in Baudelaire and even in Victor Hugo, in Shakespeare and Donne--or, if we wish for foils in prose, in Thomas Mann and Sigmund Freud. The point needs no laboring; there is the Cross which sets death as background and perspective for all human life. Death maturely meditated gives life moorings; death

enacted in imagination and worked intimately, as Shakespeare worked it, into the processes of living, gives life bearings and a course, however mysterious. The image of death is an image of all expense and of all becoming, and the image, too, of all terror and dismay, both of what is known and of what cannot be known.<sup>43</sup>

But in "Moriturus" death is not maturely meditated. It is a record of the violence of the poet's resistance, not a study of death. The poet will bargain with death, demanding as "insensate matter" to be interred in the grave, but to be treated as "sensate me." But if that is impossible, she will defy death, repudiate it entirely. She declares:

"Greater am I  
By the earth's girth

Than mighty Death!"  
All creatures cry  
That can summon breath;--  
And speak no lie.

For He is nothing;  
He is less  
Than Echo answering  
"Nothingness!"--

Such futile defiance can only lead to the despair of the last verse:

With his hand on my mouth  
He shall drag me forth,  
Shrieking to the South  
And clutching at the North.

Nor can the poet bring herself to resignation as she declares in a quieter tone in "Dirge Without Music":

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<sup>43</sup>

Blackmur, Op. Cit., p. 203.



Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave  
 Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind;  
 Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave.  
 I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.

Again this is a rather striking lyric, praiseworthy for the simplicity and sincerity of the personal revelation if not for the despair of its theme.

Even the intermittent consolations of beauty fail to distract her, she declares in "The Anguish." We remember her early intuition of this in "Second April" when she said "beauty is not enough." Now, however, in this tiny lyric she bitterly realizes it and has no hope of substitute:

I would to God I were quenched and fed  
 As in my youth,  
 From the flask of song, and the good bread  
 Of beauty richer than truth.

The poet seeks forgetfulness in "Lethe," a short uninspired little lyric in free verse. And again she seeks temporary escape in the abstract beauty of music, just as she did in the earlier poem, "The Concert," in the sonnet, "On Hearing a Symphony of Beethoven." This poem frankly declares that a moment of abstract beauty, of music in this case, is the best that the world can offer amid its many tragedies and occasions for despair. Here again, we can recognize the desire of the poet to escape from the unequal struggle of her self-imposed campaign to impose her will upon the universe. Yet the sonnet is well executed and succeeds, as Louis Untermeyer points out, despite the nearly fatal first line ("Sweet sounds, oh, beautiful music, do not cease!") in con-

veying a vivid impression of the catharsis of symphonic music.<sup>44</sup>

Two of the poems, "Hangman's Oak" and "Justice Denied in Massachusetts" were occasioned, we learn, by a local trial and conviction, the Sacco-Vanzetti case, in which many believed there had been a miscarriage of justice. However, the poems are relatively unspontaneous and heavy.<sup>45</sup>

The remainder of the poems are largely a recapitulation of earlier moods and observations of beauty in nature. The poet, perhaps, senses this and admits it in the brief free verse lyric, "Wine from these Grapes," the title of which she used for her next book of lyrics. She declares:

Wine from these grapes I shall be treading surely  
Morning noon and night until I die.  
Stained with these grapes I shall lie down to die.

The beauty of natural times and seasons still are appreciated: "Song," sings the going of summer; "Northern April," the coming of spring; "Dawn," the coming of day; "Winter Night," the coziness of a winter night.

Natural living things, too, are beautiful: "The Bobolink," "On First Having Heard the Skylark," "The Pigeons," "The Buck in the Snow," "Counting Out Rhyme," "The Plum Gatherer," and "The Hawkseed" testify skillfully to this.

Memories of strange beauty in foreign lands are recorded in "For

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<sup>44</sup>Louis Untermeyer, *Modern American Poetry* (New York, 1936), p. 486.

<sup>45</sup>Harriet Monroe, *Op. Cit.*, p. 218.

Pao-Chin, A Boatman on the Yellow Sea" and "Memory of Cassia." Two character sketches account for "Portrait" and "To a Young Girl." The familiar nostalgia for the seashore is to be found in "Mist in the Valley." Love songs are rarer but not entirely absent: "There at Dusk I Found You," "To a Musician." Even a typical ballad of the usual pattern, "The Road to Avrille," is included.

In "Pueblo Pot," the poet calls to the beauty of the gorgeous red-shafted flickers to solace the broken pot from the mesa pueblo. And she hears the voice of wisdom telling her that broken beauty cannot be consoled; it must be made whole. But the poet fears wisdom and turns, but now in vain, to consider the shards.

Wisdom, heretic flower, I was ever afraid  
Of your large, cool petals without scent!

Here in a poem of considerable skill and vitality the poet has composed a mood very characteristic of her personality. Dabbs points out that she has indeed "passionately cried out" but that she has not ever listened.<sup>46</sup>

"The Cameo" is a rather attractive comparison of an early tryst to a cameo since "Time has estranged you into a jewel, cold and pure."

The volume is concluded with seven sonnets, skillfully executed as usual. We have already mentioned "On Hearing a Symphony of Beethoven." "Sonnet to Gath" is striking and unusual in that it expresses a detached irony entirely apart from any personal expression. The

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<sup>46</sup>Dabbs, Op. Cit., p. 59.

poet satirizes the unreasoning herd instinct which makes men wish to conform. The expression is direct and colloquial.

"The Pioneer" is much more literary in language and allusion but, as a specimen of the typical conventional sonnet on the unveiling of a monument, it is well done. Surprisingly enough, considering its implications of a life of the spirit beyond death, the poet declares:

Only my standard on a taken hill  
Can cheat the mildew and the red brown rust  
And make immortal my adventurous will.

And in ringing conclusion:

Take up the song; forget the epitaph.

Two more sonnets are typical expressions of the poet's personal view of life. "Life, were thy pains as are the pains of hell," sincerely expresses what Dabbs calls the poet's "practical love of life."<sup>47</sup> Much more sentimental, picturesque and literary is the sonnet, "Not that it matters, not that my heart's cry," in which the poet expresses a realization of the hopelessness of her position:

This is my testament: that we are taken;  
Our colours are as clouds before the wind;  
Yet for a moment stood the foe forsaken,  
Eyeing Love's favour to our helmet pinned;  
Death is our master,--but his seat is shaken;  
He rides victorious,--but his ranks are thinned.

Fatal Interview has often been called the poet's best book. Thomas Chubb calls it "her greatest and most sustained piece of poetic writing."<sup>48</sup> Lewisohn describes it as a matchless example of her particular

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Op. Cit., p. 175.

talent for investing the traditional with the personal. While he finds that not all are of an inner perfection to match the outer, he says of the best that they do not lose when placed beside any sonnets in the language.<sup>49</sup> Harriet Monroe praises "the consummate art with which Miss Millay has taken over the much practiced form of the Shakespearean Sonnet, and made it her own as no other poet has perhaps since Shakespeare, himself."<sup>50</sup> Mr. Tate declares: "It is doubtful if all Miss Millay's previous work put together is worth the thin volume of these fifty-two sonnets. At no previous time has she given us so sustained a performance."<sup>51</sup>

Certainly, it is a remarkable achievement. Personally, I can testify that the reader's sympathy is enlisted and his interest held as thoroughly as by a skillful play or a vivid novel. Indeed, Mr. Chubb has assured us that there is documentary evidence that it is the "tense telling in seven-hundred and twenty-eight lines of an authentic extra-marital love affair..."<sup>52</sup> But the assurance is hardly necessary, so vividly is the experience conveyed by the poetic narrative. To be sure, it is a private and subjective drama. Nevertheless, the complete frankness of the personal revelation and the utter self-absorption, as well as the intensity of the emotion, give it the fascina-

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<sup>49</sup> Lewisohn, Op. Cit., p. 575.

<sup>50</sup> Monroe, Op. Cit., p. 216.

<sup>51</sup> Tate, Op. Cit., p. 226.

<sup>52</sup> Chubb, Op. Cit., p. 175.

tion of fundamental drama as well as the interest always inherent in "true confessions."

Moreover, the sonnet sequence appears at Miss Millay's maturest level of technical achievement. Her mastery of the sonnet form is as complete as it is to become. Mr. Tate describes the series technically: "half of the sonnets, perhaps all but fifteen, lack distinction. None is deficient in an almost final technique. From first to last every sonnet has its special rhythm and sharply defined imagery. They move like a smooth machine, but not machine-like under the hand of an expert technician."<sup>53</sup>

Here, then, we face a problem in critical judgment. How nearly is this great poetry? Or is it great minor poetry? What more do we ask? Here is vividly apprehended experience conveyed skillfully with almost its original intensity in pleasing form.

Remembering our original criteria, we first glance at the experience to which the poet has given form. Recalling it dispassionately, apart from the emotional atmosphere built up in the sonnets, we find it the rather hopeless and desperate passion of a woman for a man. From its inception when the poet first rebelliously inquires:

What thing is this that, built of salt and lime  
And such dry motes as in the sunbeam show,  
Has power upon me that do daily climb  
The dustless air? -- (Sonnet I)

she realizes that it is to be only a temporary thing:

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Tate, Op. Cit., p. 226.

This beast that rends me in the sight of all,  
 This love, this longing, this oblivious thing,  
 That has me under as the last leaves fall,  
 Will glut, will sicken, will be gone by spring.--  
 (Sonnet II)

She is even ashamed of her desire but is powerless to change:

Thus do I cry, being teased by shame and care  
 That beauty should be brought to terms by me;  
 Yet shamed the more that in my heart I know,  
 Cry as I may, I could not let you go. -- (Sonnet X)

She even makes what for her is the ultimate comparison to indicate the intensity of her passion. She compares leaving the arms of her beloved to death:

Since of no creature living the last breath  
 Is twice required, or twice the ultimate pain,  
 Seeing how to quit your arms is very death,  
 'Tis likely I shall not die again; -- (Sonnet XIV)

She compares her love to that of ancient pagan lovers "in the lively chronicles of the past":

I think however that of all alive  
 I only in such utter, ancient way  
 Do suffer love;....(Sonnet XXVI)

She expresses again, a familiar sentiment with her, the "carpe diem" theme:

Heart, have no pity on this house of bone:  
 Shake it with dancing, break it down with joy.  
 .....  
 All that delightful youth forbears to spend  
 Molestful age inherits, and the ground  
 Will have us....(Sonnet XXIX)

Soon, however, she realizes she has lost:

Love me no more, now let the god depart  
 If love be grown so bitter to your tongue!  
 .....

My kisses now are sand against your mouth,  
Teeth in your palm and pennies on your eyes.--(Sonnet XXXIX)

She concludes with the famous "Endymion" sonnet acclaimed by many as the finest she has written:

Oh sleep forever in the Latmian cave,  
Mortal Endymion, darling of the Moon!

In it she compares herself to the moon goddess, unable to recover from mortal love:

Whereof she wanders mad, being all unfit  
For mortal love, that may not die of it. -- (Sonnet LII)

One's first reaction upon reviewing the elements of the drama would be surprise that his poet who has scorned the "puny fever and frail sweat of human love" for the pure beauty of art now finds it looming so large as to obscure all else. Miss Monroe notices this with disapproval in a contemporary review:

Because we have, in Miss Millay, a poet of very unusual scope and power--moreover, a woman poet of an epoch which no longer verifies Byron's line, "Man's love is of a man's life a thing apart, 'Tis a woman's whole existence....," because of these facts which make a demand upon her, we have a right to feel that in Fatal Interview, her scope has narrowed...<sup>54</sup>

However, remembering our study of her personality and philosophy of life, we are not surprised. Basically, her conception of love has not changed. She is still concerned with only the physical aspect of loving. Mr. Dabbs notices with us that: "Though there is evidence of passion here--'desire touched with imagination'--there is more evi-

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<sup>54</sup>Op. Cit., p. 219.



dence of simple desire."<sup>55</sup> And she is here, as throughout her poetry, desperately fighting to get what she wants. In fact, it is easy to agree with Mr. Dabbs that the dominant tone of the sequence is this desperate will to have her own way.<sup>56</sup>

In such a case, we have already decided, bitter disappointment and disillusionment is inevitable. Sister Mary James realized this in her study of the sequence and explains it thus:

As the sequence approaches the end, we find her having given all. All giving creates a wound. Faith is the link between knowledge and love. But Miss Millay has no faith. She will, therefore, always bear the scar of her encounter.<sup>57</sup>

Mr. Dabbs notices much the same general lack in the poet's attitude toward love but calls it "trust." He says:

She takes love and holds it by main force, in her hands....It would appear that Miss Millay has never learned to let go with the hands. She does not trust love: it will fly away. Of course, it will from anyone who does not trust it. Or it will die. Of course--unless we give it life.<sup>58</sup>

Miss Bogan in her general pronouncement on the basic impulse of the poem has said, in another and more general way, what these two analysts have discovered. We have already quoted her opinion that the poet is indulging an "immature impulse to experience beyond the limits

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<sup>55</sup> Dabbs, Op. Cit., p. 61.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Op. Cit., p. 29.

<sup>58</sup> Op. Cit., p. 278.

of experience, to inflate the mortal passion of love into extravagant proportions."<sup>59</sup>

Here, we realize, is our poet still rebelling against the inevitable, still resisting the "facts of life" instead of accepting and enriching them by the exercise of poetic imagination. And still her attention is strictly limited to her own sensations. She has expressed in her personal voice the intensity of her desire, the vigor of her will. Naturally, we realize, she has evoked in us, her readers, the sympathy and interest which are the natural reactions of the onlooker. Even the universality of the theme of human passion should not distract us from the essentially personal, individual drama enacted in the sequence.

Moreover, in spite of the skill of the poet, or perhaps because of that technical ability in combination with a lack of original idiom, we notice a sort of pretentiousness, a rather literary quality of expression in many of the sonnets which detracts from the force of the poet's utterance.

Ransom criticizes upon this score even the two outstanding sonnets, "Heart have no pity on this house of bone" and "O, Sleep forever in the Latmian Cave." His analysis of the first of these is worth repeating. The sonnet reads:

Heart, have no pity on this house of bone:  
Shake it with dancing, break it down with joy.  
No man holds mortgage in it; it is your own;

To give, to sell at auction, to destroy.  
 When you are blind to moonlight on the bed,  
 When you are deaf to gravel on the pane,  
 Shall quavering caution from this house instead  
 Cluck forth at summer mischief in the lane?  
 All that delightful youth forbears to spend  
 Molestful age inherits, and the ground  
 Will have us; therefore, while we're young, my friend --  
 The Latin's vulgar, but the advice is sound.  
 Youth have no pity; leave no farthing here  
 For age to invest in compromise and fear.

Mr. Ransom's criticism:

..."blind to moonlight" and "deaf to gravel" are slightly overdone and inferior to the direct, "see not the moonlight" and "hear not the gravel;" that caution personified is pretty but perhaps weak, though its quality might well be quavering and clucking; that the predication furnished for this caution, the line 8, bearing the whole emphasis of the quatrain is trifling; and that even if "cluck" or "cluck up" or "cluck out" might do, "cluck forth" is a miscegenation, from which issue is unlikely; that the passage from the Latin is "literary" and impeaches the genuineness of the passion; that "farthing" is ditto, in this American idyll; that "fear" is better alone than compounded with compromise, and that the last line might conceivably have read, if nothing better should turn up, "For age to invest it, and in what but fear."<sup>60</sup>

Mr. Ransom performs the same service for the more famous but equally guilty concluding sonnet, "Oh sleep forever in the Latmian Cave." Although Miss Atkins has declared it the equal of any poem in the language for its evocation of an atmosphere and for a musical, "pretty" effect, she omits to notice that the poet has sacrificed logic to secure such an effect. Mr. Ransom analyzes this at some length.

<sup>60</sup> Ransom, Op. Cit., p. 83.

We have already noticed his study of the imagery of the poem.<sup>61</sup>

Mr. Lewisohn has chosen eight of the sonnets as the best of the fifty-two. He lists XIV, "Since of no creature living the last breath;" XXVIII? "When we are old and these rejoicing veins;" XXX, "Love is not all; it is not meat and drink;" XXXI? "When we that wore the myrtle wear the dust;" XXXVII? "Believe, if ever the bridges of this town;" XLV, "I know my mind and I have made my choice;" XLVII, "Well, I have lost you, and I lost you fairly;" and LI, "If in the years to come you should recall."<sup>62</sup> None of these are free from the faults we have enumerated but they are undoubtedly among the more pleasing of the group and bear the test of re-reading most gracefully.

I would add Sonnet XLVI as a graphic expression of the poet's foresight of the brevity of passion. In it she identifies physical passion with the physical universe and, although she fails to go beyond the physical, she touches a wisdom and a resignation she seldom reached:

Even in the moment of our earliest kiss,  
When sighed the straitened bud into the flower,  
Sat the dry seed of most unwelcome this;  
And I knew, though not the day and hour.  
Too season-wise am I, being country-bred,  
To tilt at Autumn or defy the frost:  
Snuffing the chill even as my fathers did,  
I say with them, "What's out tonight is lost."  
I only hoped, with the mild hope of all  
Who watch the leaf take shape upon the tree,

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<sup>61</sup> See Chapter IV, p. 63.

<sup>62</sup> Lewisohn, Op. Cit., p. 575.

A fairer summer and a later fall  
 Than in these parts a man is apt to see,  
 And sunny clusters ripened for the wine:  
 I tell you this across the blackened vine.

And a more important addition is the finest sonnet of the group, the almost perfect Sonnet XXXVI. Its theme is slight but strikingly expressed: the poet hates to hear the cruel words of her lover and likes to believe that the wind returns his words to him, the same wind which witnessed the courage and bravery of earlier men and women on that same spot. The imagery is skillfully drawn from the Maine seacoast, so well known to the poet. The language is completely simple and direct. The sonnet:

Hearing your words, and not a word among them  
 Tuned to my liking, on a salty day  
 When inland woods were pushed by winds that flung them  
 Hissing to leeward like a ton of spray  
 I thought how off Matinicus, the tide  
 Came pounding in, came running through the Gut,  
 While from the Rock the warning whistle cried,  
 And children whimpered, and the doors blew shut;  
 There in the autumn when the men go forth,  
 With slapping skirts the island women stand  
 In gardens stripped and scattered, peering north,  
 With dahlia tubers dripping from the hand;  
 The wind of their endurance, driving south,  
 Flattened your woods against your speaking mouth.

Of this Miss Monroe comments: "To write that sonnet...is to wave away criticism with a magic wand."<sup>63</sup>

Wine from these Grapes is a return to Miss Millay's familiar type of volume, a collection of lyrics in four parts with a series of sonnets making up a fifth part. As we would expect from the promise of

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<sup>63</sup> Op. Cit., p. 220.

the title, the poet mulls over in her lyrics the same general moods and ideas. However, a note of maturity deepens and enriches the tone of many of the poems. Louise Bogan says of the volume: "The accent of chagrin and desperation, both resolved and unresolved, is there --the sound of bitter thought, of meditation, of solitude, of the clear, disabused and unexcited mind."<sup>64</sup>

This maturity is most evident in the opening poem of the volume, "The Return":

Earth does not understand her child,  
Who from the loud gregarious town  
Returns, depleted and defiled,  
To the still woods, to fling him down.

The lyric, as Ransom summarizes it, "pictures Earth in a sort of Mother Hubbard character, receiving back the sons she sent forth to failure, but too busy to give them much attention, and unaware of any reason why they should have failed."<sup>65</sup>

Such a version of mortality is tender, he declares, and characteristic of Miss Millay's most mature phase. In fact, Mr. Ransom finds the poem "nearly perfect." His only criticism is on technical grounds. The last line, which ought to be clear and memorable, seems to him weak and even uncertain of meaning. Mr. Ransom's complaint is this:

...it intends to define what the grave, that same  
felicity which Hamlet coveted, means to the sons  
of Earth; and apparently it means that they obtain  
there her loving comfort but not her understanding.

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<sup>64</sup>Op. Cit., p. 278.

<sup>65</sup>Op. Cit., p. 107.

There are two ambiguous words. "Comfort" may mean the abstract thing or the personal comforter; and "comprehend" may mean include or understand...The poet...is not sure whether she is saying: A comforter who does not understand, or: A comfort that does not comprehend (or include) understanding. It is by a verbal accident that "comprehend" is ambiguous, and it is only by some wrenching that "comprehend" in the sense of "understand" (for which it substitutes poorly) can be predicated of the abstract term "comfort." But under what circumstances do poets adapt combinations of words that do not quite fit into perfect meanings? I know too well one way to answer that: when the combination offers the uncertain possibility of two meanings rather than the certainty of one meaning, and when at the same time it fits perfectly into the metrical pattern. The finish of the meter gives the illusory sense of an equal finish in the sense, and if there comes any doubt about the sense, it may be argued to be even better because the range of its possibilities is wider....I try to weigh the situation and the fitness of the poetic act. Here the act seems inadequate, and I look for the trouble, saying confidently: Metre...Let us remember Procrustes, who will symbolize for us the mechanical determinism of metrical necessity...Procrustes... finds the good word "comforter" too long for the bed. So he lops off her feet.<sup>66</sup>

While we are, of course, convinced by Mr. Ransom's admirable logic that the last line is technically inadequate, we agree with him that the poem is very successful as a whole, "almost effortless, like the grave speech of a woman with beautiful intonations of a voice she does not raise."<sup>67</sup>

The experience--the mood--which it conveys touches an intimation unusual with Miss Millay as to the essential unity of nature and man,

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<sup>66</sup>Ransom, Op. Cit., p. 108.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

of nature as a refuge rather than a hostile or completely indifferent force. She touches the same quiet wisdom in another poem in this volume, the simple and effective free verse lyric, "From a Train Window." Here she sees even the rickety graveyard on the hill in a neighborly light: "As if after all, the earth might know what it is about."<sup>68</sup>

However, such intimations of fellow-feeling with nature apparently do not go beyond a mood; for in "The Fawn" another free-verse lyric she reveals herself poignantly conscious of her rejection by nature. She does not belong.

I would have given more than I care to say  
To thrifty ears, might I have had him for my friend  
One moment only of that forest day:

Might I have had the acceptance, not the love  
Of those clear eyes;  
Might I have been for him the lough above  
Or the root beneath his forest bed,  
A part of the forest, seen without surprise.

Here we find the same sort of mood as in the early "God's World" when the poet cried, "To crush, to life the lean of that black bluff."

Although this is a quieter expression, it is still a return to the desire described by Tate as characteristic of a poetry of will. We quoted before: "A poetry of the will is a poetry of sensation, for the poet surrenders to his sensations of the object in his effort to identify himself with it, and to own it."<sup>69</sup> Such a poem does not ful-

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<sup>68</sup>

Dabbs, Op. Cit., p. 56.

<sup>69</sup>

As quoted by Dabbs, Op. Cit., p. 58.



fill the promise of maturity offered by the first two poems.

Perhaps the poetess has confessed the violence and variability of her moods in the charming free verse sketch of the morning after a storm on the coast of the Mediterranean, "Cap D'Antibes." The land has forgotten the storm already but the sea still "Lurches with heavy swell against the bird twittering shore." This provokes the bit of introspection: "More sea than land and I; my sulky mind, whipped high by tempest in the night, is not so soon appeased."

And the poet sees herself clearly again in the fine lyric, "The Oak Leaves." Entirely quietly, she contemplates the last leaves to fall in Autumn and sympathizes with their determination to resist age and death because of her own similar stand. Yet she realizes the futility of resistance, even realizes that there may be a greater wisdom in acceptance, but cannot bring herself to it.

There is something to be learned, I guess, from  
 looking at the dead leaves under the living trees;  
 Something to be set to a lusty tune and learned and  
 sung, it well might be;  
 Something to be learned--though I was ever a ten  
 o'clock scholar at this school--  
 Even perhaps by me.

But my heart goes out to the oak-leaves that are the  
 last to sigh  
 "Enough," and loose their hold;  
 They have boasted to the nudging frost and to the  
 two-and-thirty winds that they would never die.  
 Never grow old.  
 (These are those russet leaves that cling  
 All winter, even into spring,  
 To the dormant bough, in the wood knee-deep in  
 snow the only coloured thing.)

While it is actually personal introspection and confession, it is

so adult as to have universal implications. It is a mood of maturity, mingling wry humor, quiet irony and genuine sadness with an acceptance, if not of the natural scheme of things, at least of the futility of resistance to it. And here an intuition of fellowship with nature is again apparent.

"The Hedge of Hemlocks," "October, an Etching" and "Autumn Daybreak" are the never absent word paintings of natural scenes and atmospheres. The latter two are among the most skillful of the type. "October, an Etching" is a free verse sketch of a hunting scene, chiefly noticeable for its observation and the general appeal of such a scene. "Autumn Daybreak," in tetrameter form, genuinely evokes the chill atmosphere of such a time. "The Hedge of Hemlocks" describes in free verse a lane of giant trees which shut out everything but a neighbor.

"The Fledgling" is the least appealing, as well as the least admirable poetically, of the lyrics in the first section. Apparently a mother bird's address to her offspring, it is reminiscent of a species of "baby-talk," so archaic in form that it calls into question the modernity of our entire feathered population: "So art thou feathered, art thou flown, Thou naked thing?"

Section II is apparently dedicated to the theme of death. "Valentine" addresses a "buried love" declaring that heaven or hell would be sweet if he were there--"But you are nowhere: you are gone / All roads into Oblivion." No deep feeling for the departed one or strik-

ing feature of execution leads us to take so conventional a little offering seriously. "In the Grave No Flower," a sort of dirge in free verse, has the same musical quality of a litany as it recites the weeds and flowers found everywhere but on a grave. "Childhood is the Kingdom Where Nobody Dies," again in a free verse which very closely resembles conversational prose, is an expression of nostalgia for that period in our lives before we realize death. And, while it is recalled in a homey sort of way which could not fail to stir recollections, nevertheless, we realize that as an attitude for a poet it is equivalent to a retreat to a golden age, the escape mechanism of the romanticist who does not wish to face reality. Moreover, the attempt of the poet to convey the bitterness of a realization of death as a contrast is overdone and, to me, seems in bad taste. She describes her attempt to get a human reaction from the inanimate loved one:

Shout at them, get red in the face, rise,  
 Drag them up out of their chairs by their stiff  
     shoulders and shake them and yell at them:  
 They are not startled, they are not even em-  
     barrassed; they slide back into their chairs.

More serious in intention are the last three poems: "The Solid Sprite Who Stands Alone," "Spring in the Garden," and "Sonnet." "The Solid Sprite Who Stands Alone" is another introspective lyric in which the poet admits that one should take death in stride, although she cannot.

The solid sprite who stands alone  
 And walks the world with equal stride,  
 Grieve though he may, is not undone  
 Because a friend has died.

Yet the lyric seems perfunctory, a result of neither deep feeling nor profound meditation. The term "solid sprite" is literary and gives an aura of insincerity to the lyric. More personal and more indicative of grief is the lyric "Spring in the Garden." The poet addresses a dead friend who loved his garden, wishing that, like his bulbs and roots, he could rise again in the spring. But she realizes the futility of such a wish:

And I fear that not a root in all this heaving sea  
Of land, has nudged you where you lie, has found  
Patience and time to direct you, numb and stupid  
as you still must be  
From your first winter underground.

This is a striking expression of the poet's not very admirable conception of death. Somehow we feel repugnance in hearing addressed as "you," that which lies "numb and stupid" underground. And, indeed, it actually is a fallacy, if one reasons it. Nevertheless, while not a philosophically valid concept, it is vividly projected. In "Sonnet"--"Time, that renews the tissues of this frame,"--the poet expresses the hope that time, which changes everything, may heal her sorrow.

Time, doing this to me, may alter too  
My anguish, into something I can bear.

It is unusual for our poet to think of time as a friend. Nor does this sonnet reflect any emotional conviction. A rather conventional unimaginative sonnet, it is too heavy for its slight thought.

Section III is remarkable only by reason of its inclusion. Containing only two poems, neither of which add anything to the collec-

tion, it might well have been omitted. "Aubade," the first of the two lyrics, is a regression to the rawest kind of picturesque, romantic sensationalism, as for instance in the lines:

Round and beautiful as the globe of the onion blossom  
Were her pale breasts whereon I laid me down to die.

The other poem is equally romantic in inspiration but its expression is heavily classical. The poet wishes to escape her indifferent lover even if she must go to the classic conception of hell to do it.

"Sappho Crosses The Dark River into Hades" harks back to the love sonnets but lacks their intensity.

Section IV includes fourteen lyrics. "How Naked, How Without a Wall" is probably the most striking. It is an analysis of the position of the outstanding man, of the man who dares to be different from the group. It draws an analogy, comparing such a man to one leaving the warm stove at night to walk the countryside. Such a man, the poet realizes, has only his own introspection to guide him. An entirely adult thought, it is undoubtedly the product, to a certain extent, of personal experience, but it is not merely personal. It is, instead, a successful generalization from personal experience.

"On the "wide Heath" says something of the same thing. It describes the weary traveler who hurries home, though he is not happy there, "...it being / Too lonely, to be free." The poem, however, loses force because of its literary expression. Such time-honored properties of English poetry as the heath, the yellow whin, the loud shrew, and the poaching son make the little tale seem more picturesque

than bitterly and ironically symbolic of a common weakness of man.

Entirely forceful, in contrast, are the two poems on death. "Conscientious Objector" is still another poem of rebellion against death. Its first line expresses the theme: "I shall die, but that is all that I shall do for Death." In free verse, it has the persuasive power of the speaking voice and it does manage to convey a certain intensity of feeling. However, the intensity again is that of a personal determination. The elaborate imagery of death is not successful. It is at once too conventional and too detailed. "Lines for a Gravestone" is in five verses, of which the last illustrates the theme:

Here lieth one who would resign  
Gladly his lot, to shoulder thine.  
Give me thy coat; get into mine.

Purporting to come from the lips of the dead, the message is the reiterated conviction of the poet that life, whatever it may bring, is preferable to the oblivion of death. However, one can't help but observe, perhaps unfairly because it is only a mechanical device for getting over an idea, that the poet actually poses a paradox in allowing the insentient to dislike his lot. Certainly both poems are subject to the general critical strictures which apply to all her poetry of death, and which have been included in various pages of this study.

In "My Spirit, Sure From Marching," the poet advises her weary spirit, tired of seeking a better world, to rest and take solace in beauty:

Draw from the shapeless moment  
Such pattern as you can;  
And cleave henceforth to Beauty  
Expect no more from man.

And in the last verse she states her credo even while she admits it a "heresy":

Catch from the board of Beauty  
Such careless crumbs as fall  
Here's hope for priest and layman;  
Here's heresy for all.

This is Miss Millay's most adult and reasoned statement of that idea which she has had since "Renascence," that beauty makes life worth living. And, even as in "Renascence," we notice the same dichotomy between inhuman, perfect beauty and imperfect humanity. Beauty to the poet is still a refuge, an escape from an unsatisfactory universe. Although the poet speaks simply and with conviction, and although beauty can indeed be a solace and a refuge, yet we cannot help perceive the heresy. We must question, not whether escapism is sometimes defensible, but whether it is an attitude productive of a great poetry. We have already noted that it is not.

Two moods are skillfully projected in "Above These Cares" and "Desolation Dreamed Of." The first is a rather fanciful over-elaborated conception of the poet's spirit floating above care as a swimmer on the ocean is suspended above the life of the ocean, while her mind and body are crushed by daily tribulations as if at the bottom of the sea. The poet expresses fervent hope that her spirit will always be above such mundane concerns. "Desolation Dreamed Of" was written in a mood of disgust with the "noise and stench of man." The poet yearns for loneliness but is unable to leave friends or possessions. She realizes "This feigning to be asleep when wide awake is all the lone-

liness / I shall ever achieve." Such a mood is common to all of us and the poet demonstrates her maturity by evoking both the mood and the counter emotions which make it only a mood.

"Apostrophe to Man" was also written in a mood of disgust with mankind. In fact, its sub-title, "On reflecting that the world is ready to go to war again," reveals its inspiration. Its first line reads: "Detestable race, continue to expunge yourself, die out." However, in an effort to secure vehemence of invective and heavy irony, the poet becomes unworthily clever and wildly rhetorical. This loses any poetical effect. Such epithets as "bewildered ammonia" and "distracted cellulose" represent the same straining for cleverness which marred so much of her early poetry. "Homo called sapiens" is affected and literary.

The expression of another mood, this time one of sadness, presents a surprising contrast in the poet's idea of the future of mankind. In "If Still Your Orchards Bear" the poet pictures in a simple brotherly fashion a man ten thousand years from now, pensive and sorrowful; even as herself, he too gazes at the tart apples on the bough and the early windfall under the tree, saddened by the common tragedies of man: loss, age, failure, etc. She muses:

I think you will have need of tears;  
I think they will not flow;  
Supposing in ten thousand years  
Men ache, as they do now.

This is a pleasing little lyric. Its mood is a common one and is simply and effectively conveyed. However, the poem is very slight,



merely the expression of a mood and does not attempt any deeper interpretation.

More ambitious and less successful are the "Two Sonnets in Memory" of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti who were executed August 23, 1927. In the first, the poet praises the beauty of justice which she declares is now dead. Strictly a conventional offering with its vague abstractions, the heat of the ending lines comes as a surprise and seems feigned:

Many have praised her, we alone remain  
To break a fist against the lying mouth  
Of any man who says this was not so  
Though she be dead now, as indeed we know.

The second is more thoughtful and sincere. The poet asks where the heart, torn by pity and indignation, can ever find peace if the grave is not oblivion but simply a passage to eternity. Who, she wonders, would want to be eternal, under the necessity of forever resenting the great injustices? Nevertheless, although, because of the great concepts involved, this appears speciously philosophical, it is actually only another mood, a rationalization of natural disgust and indignation at injustice.

Only three more lyrics remain to fill the section: the brief "Epitaph" which is reminiscent of the "Figs" in its flip, clever treatment of a serious concept; "On Thought in Harness," a brief free-verse comparison of thought to a bird which must be free to soar; and "The Leaf and the Tree." The last of these three is a thoughtful little lyric. The poet wonders if each of us should not be content to con-

tribute to the knowledge and welfare of the race, as the leaf, living or dying, adds to the growth and health of the tree trunk. Perhaps, she speculates, the race as a whole has a reason for being which we cannot see:

Has not this trunk a deed to do  
 Unguessed by small and tremulous you?  
 Shall not these branches in the end  
 To wisdom and the truth ascend?

However, she concludes bitterly, this is probably not so:

Here, I think, is the heart's grief:  
 The tree, no mightier than the leaf,  
 Makes firm its root and spreads its crown  
 And stands; but in the end comes down.

For a moment the poet has touched upon a quiet wisdom in her analogy of the relation of the individual to the race but the main feeling of the poem is one of hopelessness. Nor, indeed, is the thought profound. It is actually an expression of the futility of existence. She is saying that the race will come to nothing even as the individual does. While the thought is attractively embodied in a pleasing form, blank despair is no more the attitude of the great poet, than is futile rebellion against reality.

This concept of the fate of man is presented more fully in the sonnet sequence of section five, "Epitaph for the Race of Man." Here Miss Millay attempts to express in poetic form, the tragic history of the race of man. Indeed, as her devoted apologist, Harold Cook summarizes the scope of the eighteen petrarchian sonnets, it is amazingly broad:

...She has turned from the individual to the race, and with a sense of proportion attained only through the far-sighted vision of history and science,...has summarized in eighteen chapters the biological, the eventual, the emotional record of "Man, with his singular laughter, his droll tears," ....Under a title which has its own grandeur we have, then, her profound vision of that race which grew and warred and died, at length by its own hand.<sup>70</sup>

And, examining the sonnets, we find the sequence opening with a sonnet picturing the earth deserted except for the mountain sheep, high up on the rocky crags. In succeeding sonnets the poet attempts to trace the history of man from the age of the dinosaur to the final atomic war in which man, like a diamond:

Being split along the vein by his own kind,  
Gives over, rolls upon the palm abhorred  
Is set in brass on the swart thumb of Doom.

And the final sonnet is an epitaph:

Here lies, and none to mourn him but the sea,  
That falls incessant on the empty shore,  
Most various Man, cut down to spring no more;

The point the poet seems to be trying to make is expressed in sonnet

XIV:

Him not the golden fang of furious heaven,  
Nor whirling Aeolus on his awful wheel,  
Nor foggy specter ramming the swift keel,  
Nor flood, nor earthquake, nor the red tongue even  
Of fire, disaster's dog--him, him bereaven  
Of all save the heart's knocking, and to feel  
The air upon his face: not the great heel  
Of headless Force into the dust has driven.  
These sunken cities, tier on tier, bespeak  
How ever from the ashes with proud beak

<sup>70</sup>

Op. Cit., p. 41.

And shining feathers did the phoenix rise,  
 And sail, and send the vulture from the skies...  
 That in the end returned; for Man was weak  
 Before the unkindness in his brother's eyes.

Not all the forces of nature conquered the courageous, resilient spirit of the race of men. Indeed, as Mr. Cook paraphrases:

...he combats and survives whatever disaster of storm or flood, Earth may fling upon him. For a moment man was a friend of man; from mutual disaster sprang a reluctant, a timorous and distrustful brotherhood. But Man, so strong to withstand the "headless Force" of Natural Law, was weak before "the unkindness in his brother's eyes," and what portents of eventual annihilation, the inquiring mind might discover in "whistling space" could be matched in immediate "intimate conflict" with his neighbor...<sup>71</sup>

Yes, we can agree with Mr. Cook, this is certainly an epic theme, a strange selection for a poet whose inspiration has previously been personal moods and emotions. But an epic theme demands the scope of a major poet, as well as execution suitable to so vast a project. On these grounds we must take exception to Mr. Cook's eulogy, to his statement that the sequence is the crowning achievement of the poet's work and one of the brightest glories of American poetry.<sup>72</sup>

For Miss Millay's execution does not rise to the demands of such a theme. Not that the sonnets are not carefully and skillfully done. They are perhaps too well done. Miss Flanner notices this. She observes, in comparing this work of the poet with similar projects of Robinson Jeffers:

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<sup>71</sup> Cook, Op. Cit., p. 42.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

Miss Millay has carried the mood of the epitaph beyond personal loss. Like Mr. Jeffers, she contemplates the end of civilization. Her mind, however, is on the elegy, not the revulsion. "Epitaph for the Race of Man" is eminent writing. But now that the content of her work is changing these sonnets still run as smoothly as perfect engines.<sup>73</sup>

These mechanically perfect sonnets were not the inevitable form of great concepts, but a chosen mold into which a panoramic narrative from Jeans and Eddington was cast. As Mr. Chubb remarks, the poet undoubtedly intended "to be introspective for the aggregate of 'homo sapiens' just as she had once been introspective in respect to herself."<sup>74</sup> However, the poet who had brought genuine fervor and passion to a recording of her own emotions and concerns apparently could not bring the same intensity to the concerns of the race as a whole.

Mr. Chubb, in noting this, wonders if it is the result of the poet's advancing age, since at the time of writing the poem she was forty-two years old. He asks her the question she had asked in her early poem:

Who shall say if Shelley's gold  
Had withstood it to grow old?<sup>75</sup>

However, we who have treasured the work of poets much older, can not accept such an explanation. Perhaps a youthful exuberance and a fresh reaction to the common experiences disappears. Perhaps even a

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<sup>73</sup> Op. Cit., p. 166.

<sup>74</sup> Chubb, Op. Cit., p. 176.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

youthful mystic awareness and insight, like Wordsworth's "clouds of glory," vanish. But this should be more than compensated for by a greater depth of feeling, a broader understanding and an intellectual maturity. And we do find in some of the best work of Wine from these Grapes that Miss Millay has gained as much as she has lost.

Probably we can turn more justly to her personality and type of intelligence as an explanation for the failure of the theme to possess her fully. Miss Millay, we remember from our study, was a sensibility, not an intellect. She was egocentric and emotional rather than philosophical in temperament. In view of this, we can understand why the sequence lacks the sort of thinking which such a theme requires, as well as the emotional drive of her more personal sonnet sequence, Fatal Interview.

To make up for any such lack, Miss Millay turned to her habitual resource in such a case, "high writing," an attempt to make language substitute for emotional or intellectual actuality. The sonnets thus exhibit what Dr. Zabel calls a "Cecil B. deMille extravagance of dinosaurs, volcanoes, constellations and 'monstrous nothings.'"<sup>76</sup>

However, such a poem as Sonnet VI, the Egyptian one, is both beautiful, ironic and a completely successful poetizing of the common humanity linking such remote peoples as the builders of the pyramids and ourselves.

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<sup>76</sup>Zabel, Op. Cit., p. 573.

See where Capella with her golden kids  
 Grazes the slope between east and north:  
 Thus when the builders of the pyramids  
 Flung down their tools at nightfall and poured forth  
 Homeward to supper and a poor man's bed,  
 Shortening the road with friendly jest and slur,  
 The risen she-Goat shoving blue and red  
 Climbed the clear dusk, and three stars followed her.  
 Safe in their linen and their spices lie  
 The kings of Egypt; even as long ago  
 Under these constellations, with long eye  
 And scented limbs they slept, and feared no foe.  
 Their will was law; their will was not to die;  
 And so they had their way; or nearly so.

However, the ultimate cause for the failure of the "Epitaph for the Race of Man" can be laid to an incompatibility between the poetic project and the temperament of the poet. It is significant, as well as unfortunate, that this same observation can be made of Miss Millay's next two volumes: Flowers of Evil and Conversation at Midnight.

However, the latter two volumes we will consider in the next section as products of the poet's latest period. For, very tentatively, we draw after Wine From These Grapes that entirely imaginary line dividing the poet's middle period from the latest. Such a line, of course, if valid at all, serves a purpose for the critic only by separating into units convenient for handling, the total production of any poet. To attempt a demarcation within the life of a poet is indeed questionable, for all such categories undoubtedly shift in relation to each new work. However, keeping in mind that so artificial a division is justified only by the convenience of the reader of this rather extensive study, we can assert that from our present vantage this seems the logical place for some such pause.

Reviewing the work we have studied in this section, we are conscious of some outstanding features of this phase of the career of our poet. Naturally enough, at the height of her technical ability and creative power, during this period she has produced some of her very best and much of her most characteristic work. To be sure, we notice that she has lost much of the exuberance, the fresh reaction to experience and the delight in sensory pleasures so typical of youth; however, we observe that she has also lost some of the excesses and affectations equally typical of that period. Nevertheless, we are disappointed to observe still so many evidences of immaturity at this stage in the poet's life when neither youth nor inexperience can excuse their presence.



### PART III: 1935-1946

Two volumes of Miss Millay's work represent complete departures from her previous work: Flowers of Evil in 1936 is a translation of the work of a great French poet, while Conversation at Midnight in 1937 approximates a sort of hybrid between the poetic and dramatic forms.

Flowers of Evil is, as one might guess, a translation of Charles Baudelaire's Fleurs du Mal by Miss Millay in collaboration with George Dillon. For more than one reason any extended treatment of this work is impossible as well as unnecessary in this study. Of course, these lyrics are translations rather than original poetry and, consequently, must be judged not only upon their poetic merit but upon their success in capturing the essence of the original. This would involve for the critic a comprehensive understanding and appreciation of the French masterpiece in its original form. To such a knowledge I can lay no claim. Nor would any painstaking reading yield such an understanding to a student whose knowledge of the French language is academic and laborious. Moreover, Miss Millay's ability as a linguist lies a bit outside the province of a paper concerned, primarily, with her status as a lyric poet.

However, by availing ourselves of the results of the study of critics whose scholarship and background give indisputable weight to their opinion, we can understand their verdict of failure in Miss

Millay's most ambitious project, the attempt to translate a French work of art into English.

We can call it her most ambitious project because, as we are assured by Paul Hartstall, such a task is practically insurmountable. Of course, as our mentor points out, we remember such works as the English Bible, the Gargantua of Urquhart and the Essays of Montaigne in the Florio Translation as authentic works of art in the English language. However, he reminds us, we must pay to the translator of these works the homage due to great artists for they breathed a new life into the transplanted works and made them English masterpieces.

To carry over a work of art intact from one language to another is actually impossible, he declares. Of course, general literal sense can be transcribed readily from any language into another. But equally, in every language there are words and phrases, even ideas, which beggar translation. In French he cites such examples as "se pavaner," "se balancer," "s'éteindre," "s'emmitoufler," "flamboyer" or "volupté," "ennui," "ténébreux," "frileux" and "inquiet." Such words as these, he asserts, express actions, physical states or complicated and varied moral states enriched by the associations of hundreds of years. They awake, in the spirit and heart of a Frenchman, ideas and emotions as precise as they are complex. Moreover, beyond the necessity of communicating to the reader the exact sense of all the words, a task already infinitely complex, the translator of poetry is obliged to make the reader feel also a particular rhythm and some harmonies produced

by the juxtaposition of certain sounds, a still more difficult feat.<sup>77</sup>

With this analysis in mind, we can appreciate the almost insuperable difficulty of such a project. Nor did Miss Millay seem unaware of the difficulty of her task. It is interesting to note her concept of the requirements for a successful translator in her overly-complacent introduction to the volume. She states:

The poet best fitted, technically, to translate the work of a foreign poet, is the accomplished and disciplined craftsman in his own tongue, who possesses also a comprehensive knowledge of the language from which he is translating. All his skill, however, will not avail him, if he is not sufficiently in sympathy with the poem he is translating to feel that he might have written it himself. The poem may be even strikingly different from his own work; yet, he must feel, at least during the period at which he is at work upon it, that he might have written it himself. He must be able to fill the veins of the poem, nearly emptied through the wound inflicted by the translation, with his own blood and make the poem breathe again.<sup>78</sup>

No, Miss Millay did not so much underestimate the difficulties of the task; rather, with the energy and self-assurance which are typical of her, she merely felt equal to them. It is interesting--but idle--from a psychological angle to speculate upon the processes of thought or emotion by which this forceful, direct, willful personality, an apostle of beauty as escape, came to feel that any affinity existed between

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<sup>77</sup> Paul Hartstall, "L'Albatros et Les Hommes D'Equipage," Philological Quarterly, Vol. XIX (October, 1940), p. 380.

<sup>78</sup> Edna St. Vincent Millay, "Introduction," Flowers of Evil (New York, 1936), p. viii.

her and the tortured, introverted spirit who refused to turn aside from the contemplation of the bitter, ugly hopelessness of the reality he knew.

Perhaps it was that Baudelaire, too, although in a different way, was a poet of revolt. Paul Eluard calls him "the champion of 'dandysme,' that is to say, 'of that which partakes of the character of opposition and revolt...of that which is best in human pride.'"<sup>79</sup> Perhaps it was that Baudelaire believed, as Miss Millay must have believed, even though she so often betrayed her ideal, in "la franchise absolue, moyen d'originalité."<sup>80</sup>

Whatever the thread of similarity, it was not nearly enough for the woman lyricist genuinely to enter the mind and emotions of the man who was "made as no other for reflecting the hate and doubt, the contempt and disgust, the sadness of his time," who was "able to display his passions so boldly, and empty the world of its content to indict those submissive truths, those beauties contaminated and overthrown."<sup>81</sup>

Indeed, Dr. Zabel states caustically:

Miss Millay was clearly unequipped by temperament and practice for this extremely complex labor. She had never written a line that would have led anyone to suppose her fitted for the role of Baudelaire's translator. If ever a poet required in his reader a recognition of tensions, of the

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<sup>79</sup> Paul Eluard, in the Preface to The Mirror of Baudelaire, edited by Charles H. Ford (Norfolk, Conn., 1942), p. 3.

<sup>80</sup> Baudelaire, as quoted in Mirror of Baudelaire, see Footnote 79, p. 1.

<sup>81</sup> Eluard, Op. Cit., p. 1.

subtlest allusion and allegory, of the acerbity and poignance that redeem the boldest grotesquerie and obscenity, of the anguish of nerves and exacerbation of intelligence that absolve pathos and self-exposure, it is Baudelaire. Remove his corrective rigors and audacities, his suspensions and splendours of phrasing, and he lapses into the limp, whining, self-commiserating, and neurotic figure of popular legend. Miss Millay successfully removed all of them. The result was a preëminent libel on genius in which "Léthé Lesbos" and "Un Voyage à Cythère" were veritably mistaken for the work of Ella Wheeler Wilcox and "Une Martyre," "La Chevelure," and "Rêve Parisien" became something like the latest hot-sweet number by Cole Porter.<sup>82</sup>

Not only was the poet inadequate in temperament. She also demonstrated an unfortunate deficiency in matters which call into doubt her self-appraisal of the introduction as an "accomplished and disciplined craftsman in his own tongue, who possesses also a comprehensive knowledge of the language from which he is translating." Mr. Hartstall, who has analyzed this translation, as well as two other contemporary versions, in minute detail, summarizes their triple betrayal of the great French poet. In my approximate translation from his French, the three accusations are: they have changed the essential architecture of his book; they have suppressed or badly damaged certain of his ideas, or of his images; they have not known how to give the reader an approximate idea of the harmonies of Fleurs du Mal.<sup>83</sup>

Miss Millay and her collaborator, George Dillon, the scholar finds guilty on all three counts. Nor is his charge a general one.

<sup>82</sup> Zabel, Op. Cit., p. 574.

<sup>83</sup> Hartstall, Op. Cit., p. 391.

He carefully and clearly points out the misunderstandings which brought about the failure of the translators.

His first accusation he explains by briefly and successfully establishing that Baudelaire had a definite plan in the order of his work. Quoting from the French poet's letters, as well as from a scholarly study of M. Benedetto's "L'architecture des Fleurs du Mal," he proves that Baudelaire did not intend an album of miscellaneous poems but a single tragedy with very definite stages. Although in a second edition the parts were rearranged by the poet, it was with the purpose of intensifying this effect of a tragedy embracing all of a life, opening with the image of a cradle and ending with the image of a tomb. Even the various lengths of the sections correspond to the life of the soul, in which intensity of emotion, not time, measures phases, he declares.<sup>84</sup>

Their final order is calculated, he points out, to indicate the progress of "le mal" by which the poet meant both the opposite of health and the opposite of virtue. Indeed, the scholar calls Fleurs du Mal a study of the most ugly, the most perverse, the most disgusting of vices, "l'ennui," an illness of the soul. Not only has each section its significance in this sad drama of a lost soul, the scholar declares, but even within the section the arrangement of the individual poems is significant. He outlines the logic of the order in a portion of one section, "Spleen et Idéal," to show this. In translation I quote:

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<sup>84</sup>Ibid., p. 381.

1. the divine order of poetry (I-II)
2. the definition of the ideal task of the poet (III-VI)
3. the causes which have shackled his noble activity (VIII-XVI)
4. the beauty which he knows how to touch (XVII-XXI)
5. the love which does not bring a remedy (XXII-LIX)
6. the regret, the total deception, the spleen (LX-LXXXV)<sup>85</sup>

Thus, from a first glance at the table of contents of the translation, the scholar is aware of a misunderstanding of the French work. With what the appalled scholar can only call "insouciance," Miss Millay and George Dillon have completely ignored the order established in the French original. Their volume begins with "Le L  th  ," one of the poems omitted by the poet in the second edition. Worse, it concludes with "B  n  diction," the initial poem of "Spleen et Id  al," which announces the divine origin and predicts the tragic future of poetry. Ironically, the scholar wonders if the translators were confused with the order of the religious office. However, he concludes from the general pell-mell effect that the poems were considered as entirely independent of each other. Such an attitude, he believes, is implicit in Miss Millay's preface where she declares: "The poem is the thing. Is it interesting?--is it beautiful?--is it sublime? Then it is written by nobody. It exists by itself."<sup>86</sup>

Although she is speaking of a poem's existence, independent of its creator, the scholar finds her words equally indicative of her attitude toward the organization of the Fleurs du Mal. Yet such a

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 382.

<sup>86</sup> Edna St. Vincent Millay, "Introduction," Flowers of Evil, p. xv.

cavalier attitude toward the order not only betrays the spirit of a work, but also causes mistakes in interpretation which Mr. Hartstall traces.

Another technical error arises from Miss Millay's mistaken conscientiousness. Wishing to duplicate the rhythmic accents of the French poetry, and believing that an alexandrine is the typical French line, Miss Millay and Mr. Dillon attempt to use a six-foot line in the English version. However, Mr. Hartstall demonstrates convincingly that the translators misunderstood the scansion of French poetry. Although there are twelve syllables in a typical French line, there are actually either three or four rhythmic accents, he explains. The classic line has three accents which separate the twelve syllables into four groups; the romantic line, not having the middle stress, has only three groups. Actually, then, such lines were either trimeter or tetrameter. Baudelaire, using the typical romantic line, wrote in tetrameter lines. Thus the English six-foot line neither approximates the French music, nor succeeds in reaching an effect of ease or felicity for English ears.<sup>87</sup>

Mr. Hartstall analyzes at some length their translations of a typical poem, "La Muse Vénale" to demonstrate the typical failures of the three English versions of the French work which he is considering. He concludes that each would have been as faithful--perhaps more so--to Baudelaire's original, if they had translated into prose. Certainly,

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<sup>87</sup> Hartstall, Op. Cit., p. 386.



he declares, these translators have not produced English masterpieces. And, as for the rest, he concludes in dramatic despair: "Traduttone traditone: c'est le cas de le dire."<sup>88</sup>

Between Dr. Zabel and Mr. Hartstall, we have been so guided as to declare with some confidence that such a critic as Agnes Freer was unduly eulogistic in her review of the volume.<sup>89</sup> While Flowers of Evil is undoubtedly a sincere and conscientious attempt to bring a French masterpiece to English readers, it has not succeeded either in being great poetry in itself or in conveying accurately the spirit and music of the French master.

Conversation at Midnight, the next volume of Miss Millay's to be published, is equally a departure from her usual forms. Indeed, it is unusual enough in form from any viewpoint. In her foreword, Miss Millay asks the reader not to think of it as a narrative poem interspersed with sections of dialogue, but to consider it as dialogue throughout. Indeed, she requests that we think of it in terms of a play since there are no more than about thirty lines of descriptive narrative in the entire book. However, it lacks so many of the characteristics of drama that, although we have excluded her strictly dramatic work from consideration in this study, we feel justified in including this hybrid volume.

Yet the form is not entirely original. A similar device had been

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 391.

<sup>89</sup> Agnes Freer, "Baudelaire in English," Poetry, Vol. 48 (June, 1936), passim.

used before in various ways. A famous example is Castiglione's "The Courtier," which featured a conversation between the men and women gathered with the Dutchess of Urbino during the plague. Indeed, John Peale Bishop describes it as "a tempting plan, to bring together seven men of almost as many occupations, as unlike in their opinions as in their positions, but all alike in being seriously concerned with the present disorder of the world."<sup>90</sup>

Miss Millay presents the reader with a "dramatis personae" in prose which includes a short character sketch and pen portrait of each of the seven participants in the "Conversation." Mr. Bishop, in his review, helpfully summarizes this for us. In addition, he presents his own interpretation of the role of each character in the discussion. Since his summary is brief and infinitely better than any variation I could produce, it is not necessary to apologize for quoting it in full, but only to beg leave. Mr. Bishop characterizes:

The host is Ricardo, who, though the son of a petty Italian nobleman, shows no Fascist adherence, but rather the subtle scepticism and aloof dignity of the aristocratic mind. It is to his house in Tenth Street, New York, that the others come. To no small extent, he is the arbiter of their difference and, more than any other among the characters, he seems to represent the controlling play of the poet's mind. He is, like most of his guests, in his forties. John, the gifted and unsuccessful painter; Pygmalion, a very successful, rather sophisticated, and on the whole obnoxious writer of stories for popular magazines; Carl, who is Communist and poet; Father Anselmo, who is Catholic and musician: all have reached that doubtful age

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John Peale Bishop, "A Diversity of Opinions," Poetry (Nov., 1937), p. 99.

when man must know, if ever, by what force or reason he lives. Merton, the prosperous stockbroker, is there to represent wealth and the pursuits of the wealthy under Capitalism. He is sixty-eight, sufficiently sustained, and not only materially, but morally, by the substance of past accomplishments. If he cannot be justified by his works, he will be by their profits. Lucius is twenty-five, in love, and unhappy. He is full of contempt for those corrupting words of the contemporary world, which, as the advertising copy he writes for little pay, are put between the populace and the objects for which they must be persuaded to give their money. Perhaps because of this, he has less to say than any of the other characters. Or it may be because he alone is young enough to survive on none but animal faith.<sup>91</sup>

The imaginary dialogue, partly in free verse, partly in various other forms, between these seven men makes up the volume. Ricardo's butler, Metcalfe, brings in a tray of whiskies and claret and the conversation begins. It lasts, not until Midnight, but until 2:00 A.M. the next morning. It shifts, with what Thomas Chubb describes as "a convincing lack of plan," through quail shooting, bird protection, women, God, Fascism, salmon fishing, advertising, modern conveniences, Communism and the Catholic faith. Mussolini is mentioned and so are Hitler and Roosevelt. The talk covers the present world. And as conversation it has a convincing ring--a realistic tone remarkable in poetry. Mr. Chubb points out its genuine virtuosity, praising its verisimilitude:

Though it contains some of the worst lines  
Miss Millay has ever written, though its engine  
knocks badly at times, it moves toward and at-  
tains its goal. Particularly, the transitions

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

are excellent. But what strikes the male commentator most forcefully is its psychological and conversational accuracy. There is no woman in the book--and my guess as to the reason for this is that by having only male characters, Miss Millay feels it easier to maintain an impartial viewpoint --and yet I can detect in its hundred-odd pages only one improbable line. That is when she suggests the kind of a name a man would give a bird dog.<sup>92</sup>

Up to this point, we can echo the reviewers words with enthusiasm, even though forced to take his comment concerning the naming of bird dogs on faith alone, and even though making a slight mental reservation upon the score of the excellence of some of the transitions. However, our harmony becomes a discord when the eulogistic Mr. Chubb goes on to declare: "It is not only this medley of real conversation that gives the book its weight. That is entertainment, like a good drawing-room comedy. But Conversation at Midnight is much more than that."<sup>93</sup> For while we agree implicitly as to the entertainment value of the volume, we cannot always echo his confidence in its poetic value.

Mr. Bishop states the case very well when he says:

For once we have granted the poet her conception, and allowed these conversations their tone, it is not easy to see how they could have been bettered. But when they are ended, long after midnight, when the shouts of the last quarrel have died down, and the last good-night been said, if we are conscious of having been more amused than moved, of having been, in fact, continually diverted and scarcely moved at all, the fault is not in the talk.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Chubb, Op. Cit., p. 178.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Bishop, Op. Cit., p. 99.

The poetic value of a work, as we remind ourselves, has little to do with the virtuosity required to produce a clever facsimile of drawing-room conversation. And when we look for the elements which are of the essence of poetry we do not find so much to praise.

The poet undoubtedly intended a very serious poetic expression of the modern search for faith. For, as Mr. Bishop analyzes, it is the demand and desire for faith on the part of man that is found at the center of all these conversations. Although the participants take up every other conceivable question, they return eventually to faith.<sup>95</sup> Mr. Chubb states the subject a bit differently but his summary amounts to much the same thing. Declaring that the significance of the conversation lies in the questions that are of serious importance to the conversationalists, he lists these: "God, religion, an attitude toward the unknown--seven characters in search of, shall we say, the author. Society--man's relation to his fellow beings--seven characters in search of, or in denial of Utopia."<sup>96</sup>

At first glance, this lengthy piece of talking seems not only a remarkable departure from the poet's former work but an amazing product from a poet who has studiously avoided coming to grips with experience, who has evaded the forming of a mature attitude toward life. Is this the mature, thoughtful facing of life and experience which we have missed in her work? On further consideration, however, we recognize our familiar poet. For Miss Millay has done much the same thing as

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<sup>95</sup>Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>96</sup>Chubb, Op. Cit., p. 179.

she did in "Epitaph for the Race of Man." There, as here, as Mr. Chubb puts it, she tries to become introspective for the race of man.<sup>97</sup> However, just as in the former she succeeded in telling a dramatic tale from the evolutionary texts instead of presenting a fresh realization of the plight of man, so here she succeeds in presenting dramatically seven points of view without any deep conviction.

This, of course, is partly the result of the scheme of the poem. It is a dramatic poem, Mr. Bishop reminds us, "in the limited sense that each of the characters speaks from his own and not directly from the poet's mind."<sup>98</sup> And from this point of view Mr. Chubb praises the poet's objectivity with some justice. He notices: "...a fair objectiveness. Seven points of view come up during the long evening of talk and she does not, so far as I can see, make propaganda for any one of them."<sup>99</sup>

No, the poet cannot be accused of partiality or propaganda. So fair is her presentation that the critic admits that "the case for capitalism could hardly be better put than Merton puts it" and that, in *Carl*, she has "put the best case she imaginatively could for Communism." In Merton, moreover, she makes apparent "the advantages of an undeluded if somewhat limited mind," and in *Carl* a mind "where de-

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Op. Cit., p. 102.

<sup>99</sup> Op. Cit., p. 179.

lusions have largely taken the place of thought."<sup>100</sup> Not only are such political faiths as Communism and Capitalism argued but even, however inadequately, religious beliefs, such as Catholicism, sentimentally rather than philosophically presented by Anselmo, and agnosticism equally emotionally represented by Ricardo.

The scheme was a tempting one and it was carried out faithfully. However, it had several grave disadvantages. Mr. Bishop states the outstanding one:

Nothing could be more tempting than to bring together in a room a group of men and let each speak his heart out. For so the poet can give play to all the opposing opinions which,...disturb his mind with claims and counterclaims. But in the end we are left with merely a diversity of opinions and there is nothing in literature that has less lasting power.<sup>101</sup>

Another disadvantage is the brevity and surface brushing enforced by the conversational tone. This swift, passing treatment of very large concepts does not prevent dramatic accuracy but does limit the depth of the philosophical treatment of any of the intellectual systems of thought which are breezily introduced and dismissed. And, if the philosophical element suffered at the expense of the dramatic element, the reverse is equally true. Mr. Bishop demonstrates this in a comparison with the earlier work using the same dramatic device, "The Courtier." He notices:

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<sup>100</sup> Bishop, Op. Cit., p. 102.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

...though all that the men and women gathered about the Duchess of Urbino have to say has an interest that is more than historical, at least while we are reading Castiglione's account of their conversations, once the book has been long closed, what remains in the mind is not so much what was so eloquently said, no, not even the wonderful discourse on love that only ceased when the candles had turned pale in the dawn, but the emotion with which the author has been able to endow his characters. But they were not only names. They were those whom Castiglione had known, honored, loved and all, or nearly all, when he wrote were gone in death. Out of all the discussions about the courtier, nothing stays longer than the passionate and poignant cry, "The Dutchess, too, is dead!" And it is precisely that feeling for her characters that is lacking in Miss Millay's book. They are dramatized points-of-view.<sup>102</sup>

Thus, looked at strictly as a dramatic product, the volume lacks emotional appeal. In the same sense it lacks dramatic movement; there is no feeling of conflict rising to a climax or falling toward resolution. The conversation could have concluded earlier or continued longer without affecting any vital change. However, as poetry, its lack of any emotional element is equally evident although in a different way. No one of the dramatized points of view has been so thoroughly experienced, so deeply felt as to move the reader. In fact, we realize that, while they have said some profound and some witty things, and while the subjects they discuss are important, actually they are all arguing.

Remembering our rule-of-thumb borrowed from Yeats, we wonder if the poet is arguing here with herself. We are inclined to believe she is not. Her own position, expressed largely in Ricardo's aloof, im-

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 104.



partial skepticism, is swayed by none of the arguments and does not change, yet does not grow more firm. No, the poet seems to be presenting the arguments of some people with other people. She is still, in a sense, "arguing with others." Inevitably, thus, she has produced clever rhetoric rather than genuine poetry.

We find ourselves, after our brief analysis of the volume, able to understand Dr. Zabel's dismissal of Conversation at Midnight as a "fiasco, which remains the ultimate test of charity among Miss Millay's friends." From this and from the "surpassing blunder" of the unfortunate translation of Baudelaire, he finds the next volume, Huntsman, What Quarry?, "plainly an effort at recovery." As such, he declares, it must be indulged.<sup>103</sup>

When we notice that this lyric collection is among the longest of Miss Millay's volumes, we are surprised to realize that it contains nothing new either in technical effects (except for the increasing frequency of a desultory free verse) or in subject matter (except for an increasing preoccupation with such current affairs as the plight of Spain and Czechoslovakia). In six parts, the volume contains the usual ballads, such as "The Ballad of Chaldon Down;" love lyrics, like "Rendezvous"; nature studies, like "The Rabbit" and "Impression: Fog Off the Coast of Dorset"; short stories in verse, like "The Princess Recalls Her One Adventure"; and rather perfunctory lyrics on death, like "Mortal Flesh, Is Not Your Place in the Ground?". Part Four con-

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<sup>103</sup>

Zabel, Op. Cit., p. 575.

tains elegies to the poet's friend, Elinor Wylie. Eight love lyrics under the heading of "Theme and Variations" in Part Five commemorate yet another brief love affair. Part Six contains the sonnets which conclude the volume.

The pattern into which the book falls is immediately recognizable, Dr. Zabel observes; and certainly, he adds, no one can say it isn't Miss Millay's own. His caustic summary of the volume is well worth repetition:

The book opens with an English hunting-gentry ballad, "Chaldon Down," followed by a good many tart and girlish survivals of Greenwich Village impertinence whose titles are their trade mark: "Modern Declaration," "Short Story," "Rendezvous," "Song for Young Lovers in a City." There are several dashes into Park Avenue French: "Fontaine, je ne boirai pas de ton eau!" and "The Fitting." There are a number of samples of last-minute indignation on Czecho-Slovakia and Spain. There is a suite of elegies on Elinor Wylie and there are rewritings of standard favorites, which this time go by such names as "Mortal Flesh, Is Not Your Place in the Ground?", "Pretty Love, I Must Outlive You," and "The Princess Recalls Her One Adventure." There is the inevitable batch of sonnets, several of which (e.g., "I, too, beneath your moon, almighty Sex, / Go Forth at nightfall crying like a cat") are strenuous beyond even Miss Millay's usual pitch.

And in its forms the book is as repetitious as in its themes and tones. Tetrameter lyrics alternate familiarly with the oddly desultory free-verse that Miss Millay has practiced for years quite innocent of critical restraint or advice. The archaistic whimsy of "In April, when the yellow whin / Was out of doors and I within" and of participles with a stressed -ed is quaintly set against well-calculated pot-shots of rebellious vehemence and realism ("Menses," "Intention to Escape From Him"), while

the sonnets, with their exhaustive cri de coeur and Elizabethan luxuriance, punctually bring up the rear.<sup>104</sup>

It is evident to anyone who has read her work consistently that the poet has rewritten her earlier volumes. Even someone reading only this work would be conscious of some such phenomenon. For, naturally, the freshness of the original is missing. The poet has attempted to substitute for a new realization, for a deeper plumbing of more complex experience, the striking presentation of older intimations and moods. The effort to distract the attention of the reader by verbal rockets from the attenuation in the poetic substance results in the usual affectations, such as the "Park-Avenue French" and the invoking of quaint names of the English countryside. (Dr. Zabel lists all these from the one unfortunate imitation-ballad, "Chaldon Downs": Lulworth Cove, Diffey's Farm, Durdle Door, Chydyok, Channel Shambles, blackthorn, magpies and gorse.) It results in such useless lapses from taste as the ballad, "I, too, beneath your moon, almighty Sex," and as the free verse lyrics, "Menses (He speaks, but to himself, being aware how it is with her)" and "Pretty Love I Must Outlive You." The presence of such cliches as "balm in Gilead" upon which one sonnet is built, such archaisms as the rhyming "beget" and "eat," the amazing, arch allusions to "Mr. S." and "Mr. K." for Shelley and Keats, which bring a jocular note to enliven elegy IV, and the curt, journalistic term "obit" in elegy III can be traced to the same source.

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<sup>104</sup>

Ibid., p. 570.

Such verbal audacities and extravagances naturally are an attempt to enliven the perfunctory tone of lyrics which depend upon rhetoric to replace the poetic imagination. Some of the lyrics are frankly conventional and perfunctory: the elegies, as Dr. Zabel observed; some of the love poems, "But if you love me it was long ago," "What Savage Blossoms," "When did I ever deny, though this was fleeting," etc.; some of the nature poems, such as "Thanksgiving Dinner"; and some of the poems on world affairs, especially "Czecho-Slovakia" and "Say that We Saw Spain Die."

Yes, Miss Millay chose the right poem to symbolize the spirit of her volume, Huntsman, What Quarry?. The little story of the huntsman who sought the "red brush / Of remembered joy" at the expense of that available in the present--the willing maid, the supper and soft bed --is somehow unintentionally symbolic of the poet who has so often recast old intimations, emotions and moods instead of demanding of herself a more and more mature understanding of experience.

Yet she retains what Dr. Zabel describes as her "bustling technical competence." And she sometimes recalls an old ease in atmospheric suggestion, and a touch upon local and human pathos. The critic points to "Truce For a Moment" as a lyric in which her best manner and mood is apparent. Here they awaken "tracts of heavy and pretentious language," he declares.<sup>105</sup> The poem reads:

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<sup>105</sup>

Ibid., p. 571.

Truce for a moment between Earth and Ether  
 Slackens the mind's allegiance to despair:  
 Shyly confer earth, water, fire and air,  
 With the fifth essence.

For the duration, if the mind require it,  
 Trigg'd is the wheel of Time against the slope;  
 Infinite Space lies curved within the scope;  
 Of the hand's cradle.

Thus between day and evening in the autumn,  
 High in the west alone and burning bright,  
 Venus has hung, the earliest riding-light  
 In the calm harbor.

The first poem of "Not So Far as the Forest" is an attractive lyric which expresses a mood of foreboding. In it the poet expresses the chill premonition of the end of love or the coming of age. It has a genuine ring of personal emotion, simply expressed. Poem VIII, "The time of year ennobles you," from "Theme and Variations" is a sour love lyric but it has a ring of sincerity.

However, on the whole the volume is indeed characterized by the "make-shift and time-serving mediocrity" of which the critic accuses it.<sup>106</sup> In fact, we cannot hope to do more than echo Dr. Zabel's final judgment:

The kindest of critical indulgence would have advised discarding half its pages. Miss Millay's free verse should certainly be abandoned; she has never shown the slightest comprehension of its uses. The whimsical love-lyrics, most of the sonnets, the perfunctory little elegies on Elinor Wylie, and such aging pertness as one gets in "To a Calvinist at Bali" and "The Fitting" merely cast discredit on her winning use of these devices in the earlier volumes. The depressing smartness of the book's titles --more of the Ferber touch--should have been pruned.

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Zabel, Op. Cit., p. 572.

All but five or six poems should have been submitted to a revision of parts--of epithet, phrasing, allusion and design--that would have relieved them of much that is now stereotyped and platinously modish.<sup>107</sup>

Make Bright the Arrows appeared the following year, 1940. The title this time is taken from the Bible. The poet supplies the full quotation from the "Lamentations of Jeremiah": "Make bright the arrows; gather the shields: the Lord hath raised up the spirit of the kings of the Medes." The little quotation and the short introductory lyric based upon it are intended to supply the keynote of the volume.

Make bright the arrows,  
Gather the shields;  
Conquest narrows  
The peaceful fields.

Stock well the quiver  
With arrows bright:  
The bowman feared  
Need never fight.

Make bright the arrows,  
O peaceful and wise!  
Gather the shields  
Against surprise.

And as an indication of the theme of the volume the little lyric is efficient. For imminent war, concern over tyranny and invasion in Europe, pleas for preparedness and world cooperation entirely take up the fourteen lyrics and nine sonnets of the tiny volume.

The sentiments of the poet are irreproachable and her motives praiseworthy since the warnings and advice she gives were important and necessary. In 1940, they were very timely. In fact we realize,

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<sup>107</sup>

Ibid., p. 575.

suddenly, that this is the first of Miss Millay's volumes to be entirely occasional and concerned with the current events of the moment. In consequence, already in 1946, the volume is dated. Events have moved so swiftly as to give the little volume only an historical interest. Indeed, "only in historical interest" is accurate in more than one sense for the poetical value of the volume is negligible.

Since the poems are strictly topical they are not repetitious of former themes. However, the forms and technical effects remain the same. Of the thirteen poems in parts I, II, and III, a majority of ten are a sort of free verse, two are tetrameter and one is a parody of the nursery rhyme, "And then there were none." Part IV contains a brief imitation of a medieval sacred mystery play and part V, the usual nine concluding sonnets.

Most of the poems are a call to arms--a warning of coming war and a warning to prepare. "An Eclipse of the Sun is Predicted" is a figurative, rather literary expression of these things. "Intelligence Test" is direct propaganda, question and answer plan, for army enlistments. "Overheard at a Bar" is also dialogue, this time between A and B; it contains the warning: "Don't you see / For God's sake, if England lost this war, where We would be?". "Underground System," which is reprinted from the last volume, warns of the fifth column undermining a strong and confident country. "The Blizzard" also advises preparedness by telling a story of the occupants of a warm room during the blizzard who wake too late to realize that the room isn't safe, that it is

actually a fool's paradise.

The remainder of the poems amounts to a sympathetic and very successful propaganda for the European countries threatened by Nazi invasion. In "Memory of England, October 1940," the poet declares that she is thankful that her mother did not live to see bombs dropped over England and she recalls a happier time there. In "I Forgot for a Moment," she contrasts the peaceful sight of Holland, France and England with the fate fast overtaking them. "I Dreamt the Lowlands" is a wish that Holland had a fourth dyke to guard against treachery. These poems are all free verse and have the accents of the speaking voice. "To the Maid Of Orleans," on the contrary, is in tetrameter and has an unfortunate doggerel-like rhythm as the poet invokes the patron saint of France to save again her distressed country. This same sing-song is apparent in "Ballade of Lost Cities" which has as a refrain, "Where are the towns of yesterday?", a parody of a popular query. It is a recital of the captured cities of Europe. "And then there were none" is also a sing-song parody of the well-known nursery rhyme.

Ten white ptarmigan  
Perching in a pine;  
Hitler gave his solemn oath;  
And then there were nine.

The longest poem of this volume, "There Are No Islands Any More," was individually reprinted later in book form. It is a plea for internationalism and a warning against blind isolationism which is no longer defensible. This poem is in tetrameter and has as a refrain: "The tidal wave devours the shore: / There are no islands any more." However,



it does not have the perfunctory doggerel rhythm of "To the Maid of Orleans" or the sing-song of the other two rhymed poems. As a piece of propaganda it is so urgent, so timely and so truthful as to be successful.

"Noël! Noël!" (Reflections before Christmas, 1940), alone, of the poems in the volume has a personal note. It is an address to Jesus. The poet recounts her youthful love for Jesus and for Don Quixote. She declares that while she has never believed, she has been kinder for her early love; and charity in the world of 1940 was a rare virtue. The poem, however, is entirely uncomposed--on the level of self-expression.

"The Crooked Cross" is the name of the little play. It is naïve --probably intentionally--but one doubts if it ever catches the genuine simplicity and childlike quality which co-exist with actual maturity in the truly medieval. It dramatizes the story of Sister St. Helène's horror at the fate hanging over her innocent little charges in the convent school, her incredulity at their vision of an "iron cross" and her death or collapse.

The nine concluding sonnets are also largely concerned with war and peace. In sonnets I and II, the poet declares that the price of peace may be too high. In sonnet III, she bewails statesmen who concern themselves with election while London and Rome are in danger, and she asks America to rise to Herculean efforts. Sonnet IV cries that men can awake "And fight to save from rape the human soul." Sonnet V notices that in the present danger "Kings sprint for cover and their

slaves too proud." Sonnet VII despises "The Old Men of Vichy" who "Sold their son's hopes to make their porridge last."

Only two sonnets, VI and IX, are personal. Sonnet VI, "I must not die of pity; I must live," concludes so characteristically with:

Blue, bright September day, with here and there  
On the green hills a maple turning red,  
And white clouds racing in the windy air!--  
If I would help the weak, I must be fed  
In wit and purpose, pour away despair  
And rinse the cup, eat happiness like bread.

This sonnet has a note of sincerity and emotion which makes it attractive. And the poet's glance at natural beauty to sustain her determination to be happy is so familiar as to be endearing.

Sonnet IX is attractive for its description but marred by the classic personification of the sun which is literary, affected and unnecessary in this personal poem. However, its realization of the divine patience of nature is a poetic perception derived from an immediate but actually universal truth.

Could we learn patience, though day-creatures all,  
Our day should see us godlier than we are.

We realize, then, that except for these two sonnets, possibly "Noël! Noël!", although this is closer to rumination than poetry, and perhaps "Memory of England," also on the level of self-expression, that this little volume is strictly topical. It can be regarded as good propaganda, motivated by a sincere patriotism, and a tender heart.

The Murder of Lidice, the poet's last volume, written in 1942 for the Writers' War Board, is also to be classed as a skillful propaganda

in verse. It tells in thirty-two pages and twenty-six sections the story of the massacre of a peaceful, inoffensive Bohemian village of Lidice by the Nazi war lord. The genuine horror and undoubted truth of the contemporary event lend to its telling a compelling force that make art unnecessary. It closes with an exhortation to America to stop the Nazi war lord:

Careless America, crooning a tune:  
Catch him! Catch him and stop him soon.

Once again reviewing, we realize how little the volumes of this latest phase of the poet's career contribute to her poetic stature. Twice, in Conversation at Midnight and Flowers of Evil, the poet attempted large projects for which she was unprepared and to which she was temperamentally unsuited. Both of these attempts met with failure in varying degrees. An effort at recovery and a return to habitual patterns represented by Huntsman, What Quarry? was unsuccessful because of its very seeking to duplicate past successes. The last three volumes, although they displayed her patriotism and technical excellence, were skillful propaganda rather than poetry.

We cannot but observe that far from being the climax of a long and successful career this latest period of the poet's productive years represent a decline in creative power and poetic achievement.

## CHAPTER VI

### HER PLACE AS A MINOR POET

Having investigated all the factors which affected the work of Edna St. Vincent Millay, having studied all the aspects of her art and, finally, having carefully read and attempted judgment upon her poetry, we are now faced with the necessity of forming, in conclusion, an estimate of her place as a minor poet of English Literature. To do this one must put her work in the scale, not only with contemporary poetry, with the poetry of women or with American poetry, but with all the rest of poetry written in English, without distinction of sex or nationality. Indeed, as one critic reminds us, the same ultimate test awaits all poets, men and women alike.<sup>1</sup> In it are obliterated all differences of timeliness and of popularity; only poetic values are of significance.

We leave aside the poet's dramatic work which is largely (in the words of both Ransom and Zabel) on a par with "Senior Girls' Stunt Night" performances<sup>2</sup> except for the happily-conceived and well-executed poetic libretto for Deems Taylor's opera, "The King's Henchman." However, we have the considerable total of the poet's twelve volumes of poetry, written between 1912 and 1942, upon which to base such an estimate.

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<sup>1</sup> Davison, Op. Cit., p. 672.

<sup>2</sup> Ransom, Op. Cit., p. 104; and Zabel, Op. Cit., p. 576.

But the outlines of the field of minor poetry are so broad and its standards so amorphous that it is difficult to express such a judgment. One is tempted to borrow the phraseology of a more experienced critic as he pronounces such a verdict upon another minor poet who had a great deal in common with Miss Millay. Blackmur's estimate of Housman is singularly appropriate in this connection:

Thus Housman was not a great minor poet in terms of his conceiving imagination. He did not even attempt to compose anything but the least possibility of his dominant idea with the life it was meant to express. Neither was he a great minor poet in the lesser sense of possessing extraordinary control of his medium without reference to its burden. The medium of poetry is language, and the sign of achievement is the persistent emergence of fresh and vital idiom. Housman's language is full of archaisms, stock phrasings, correct attitudes, metronomic meters, dulled rhymes, and all the baggage of dead idiom. All that retrieves him from disuse is his personal intensity and the universal popularity--as it strikes a universal weakness--of his theme.<sup>3</sup>

Thus one can repeat, using the terms of this judgment, that Miss Millay was not a great minor poet in terms of her conceiving imagination. She, too, did not attempt to compose anything but the least possibility of her idea of death with the life to which it should give meaning and purpose. She, even as the older poet, did not attempt to conceive of but one sort of death, "the blotting death which has no relation to life." She did not attempt to bring into harmony her concepts of the relation of woman to man, or of man to the universe or beauty to love. Housman, the critic tells us, did not so much submit

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<sup>3</sup> Blackmur, Op. Cit., p. 204.

to the limits of his sensibility, as deliberately impose a narrow discipline in the interests of what can only be called an escape from a full response to experience.<sup>4</sup> Miss Millay, in another way, also evaded a full response to experience.

From the outset of her career, we noticed she has avoided a "quarrel with herself" which might have led to a unified view of life. Instead she has sought the evasion of the romantic, attempting to impose her will upon the universe. As one critic expressed it, she quarreled with the world instead of with herself.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, we observe a lack of growth and a failure to achieve maturity which would have followed upon a more honest facing of experience.

Such a curtailment of growth, as Dr. Zabel remarks, in the case of Housman led at least to a refining and subtilizing concentration of limited means, a firmer stamping into the substance of his language the characteristic bent of his mind and emotions. In the case of Miss Millay, it led to an increasing proportion of rhetoric in her later work; it led to repetition, "a vulgarizing of what was once fresh and lively, a wearisome iteration of attitudes."<sup>6</sup>

To go back to the terms of our judgment, no more than Housman is Miss Millay a great minor poet in the lesser sense of possessing extraordinary control of her medium without reference to its burden. True,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 203.

<sup>5</sup> Dabbs, Op. Cit., p. 62.

<sup>6</sup> Zabel, Op. Cit., p. 573.

we have remarked upon her competence and technical skill, her musicianship, her literary derivations and standards. Nevertheless, taking as a criterion the persistent emergence of fresh and vital idiom as a sign of achievement we find her wanting. Like Housman's language, her poetic language is frequently full of archaisms, literary locutions, affectations, stock phrasings, theatrical exaggerations and much of the baggage of dead idiom. While she can seldom be accused, as Housman has been, of metronomic meters and dulled rhymes she is undoubtedly guilty of an allied offense in the "reckless and machine-turned Elizabethanism" of her sonnet sequences.

Yet, seemingly at the opposite extreme, she has been accused, and with considerable justice, of assuming more and more the accents of the speaking voice. This is especially noticeable in her later rambling, rather discursive free verse. Housman's voice, however personal his sentiments, is veiled and transmuted by a complex screen of classical tradition. Thus he seems to speak with the voice of the people and his words seem to come somewhat as the voice of life. But Miss Millay's voice is not transmuted by any such mechanism, partly because such a screen is not available to her and partly because she hasn't wanted it. She has had from the first only the "very definite music of song, the formal quality of which served as a screen," but, with the passage of time, she seemed to rely still more upon the "indefinite music of the speaking voice."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Dabos, Op. Cit., p. 64.

Although, like Housman, she has had a certain command of the language of the people she has usually relied heavily upon her own personal language. This characteristic we have come to realize is inevitable because it is usually her own personal voice--her will--that she has wished to express. Thus her most characteristic poetry has been the expression of her rebellious or frustrated will. In fact, it can be said even more surely of Miss Millay than of Housman that her personal intensity and the universal popularity--as it strikes a common trait--of her theme, a practical will for life, retrieves her from disuse.

Indeed, we can say of Miss Millay, that not only her most characteristic poetry but her best poetry is the expression of her rebellious and frustrated will. This may seem contradictory, considering our study of a poetry of the will as a lesser order of poetry, an evasion of the poet's art of using the creative imagination. But Miss Millay's departures from her most characteristic type of poetry--her "presumptions to the higher poetic laurels" in such sonnet sequences as the "Epitaph for the Race of Man," her "philosophical excursions" such as "Conversation at Midnight" and her attempt at translation of Baudelaire--such essays have, as Dr. Zabel descriptively asserts, "at worst approached the suicidal."<sup>8</sup> And, of course, she does not deserve to be judged finally upon the failures in her work. Indeed, as Mr. Ransom reminds us: "...she has the right to be measured as a workman

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<sup>8</sup> Zabel, Op. Cit., p. 576.



by her excellent best."<sup>9</sup>

It is our task now to isolate and appraise this "excellent best" upon which we must base our final estimate of Miss Millay. At one stage in her career, Ransom attempted to do just this. His method was to identify by restriction the field in which her "quite positive talent" is displayed. He states:

The formal or "literary" poems fall for the most part outside this field. She is not a good conventional or formalist poet...because she allows the forms to bother her and to push her into absurdities...Then the young girl poems fall outside it; and I am afraid I refer to more poems than were composed in the years of her minority. This charming lady found it unusually difficult, poetically speaking, to come of age....But gradually the affectations of girlhood disappear. When they are absent, she has a vein of poetry which is spontaneous, straightforward in diction, and excitingly womanlike; a distinguished objective record of a natural woman's mind. The structures are transparently simple and the effects are immediate.<sup>10</sup>

Mr. Ransom further states his preference in general for her shorter pieces, since few of the poems, unless they are very short, are free from fumbling. He adds to his summary a list of the subjects or themes upon which she has done her best work. We have quoted his analysis in part throughout our study; however, it will bear repetition in full:

Her best subjects are death, which she declines like an absolute antiphilosopher to accept or gloze, a case of indomitable feminine principle; personal moods, which she indulges without without apology, in the kind of integrity that is granted to the kind of mind that has no direction

<sup>9</sup> Ransom, Op. Cit., p. 103.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

or moldulation except by its natural health; and natural objects which call up her love or pity. I have to except from this list the love of a woman for a man because, in her maturity at least, she has reserved that subject for the sonnets, and they are rather unconventional in sentiment but literary, and corrupted by verbal insincerities.<sup>11</sup>

We cannot doubt that Mr. Ransom has unerringly chosen the best elements of the poet's work.

Reviewing the poetry we have considered in this study, we find, too, a lasting appeal in the poet's lyrics of death. If they do not contain the wisdom and truth of great poetry, or even great minor poetry, they do, at their best, reflect a personal intensity and sincerity. These qualities in the expression of an attitude which, though not especially admirable, is nearly universally entertained at times, naturally elicit universal sympathy. The same personal vitality and charm make her best poetry of transient moods, when not spoiled by self-conscious poses, perennially appealing. Her love or pity for natural objects is sometimes marred by her uncertainty regarding her own place in the universe and her relation to nature. However, when sincere, and free from straining after effect and forcing of emotion, these poems were invested with the same warmth and vitality.

Her poetry of love--or rather passion--is so characteristic of her whole career that it cannot be set aside in any estimate of her work. Of course, her conception of love was marred from the first by a confusion of values. True, her attitudes shifted from a frantic

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. (The underlining within the quotation is mine.)

seeking to a confused rebellion, distrust, a cynical levity, an escape into art, a complete surrender to physical passion, and finally to a rather disillusioned acceptance. Nevertheless, she never resolved the dichotomy in her conception of love any more than she did in her vision of death. Mr. Ransom has pointed out that the phase of the poet's work which has the love of a woman for a man as a theme is, more than any other, marred by verbal insincerities and literary affectations. More than any other phase it is also marred by posturing and attitudinizing. However, although it does not contain her best work, and although it sometimes contains sentiments not only "unconventional" but definitely repugnant and offensive to good taste, it sometimes, at its best, reaches the status of "an objective record of natural woman's mind" in an age when the individual is denied the aid of church, tradition or social mores in forming individual adjustments. Moreover, it has left us with the lovely Maine sonnet from Fatal Interview.

Her best work is to be found, without doubt, except for the poem, "Renascence," in the lyric collections from Second April to Wine from these Grapes. However, just as it is possible to find verse of poor quality in these volumes, we are assured that, in her poorest volumes, it is still possible to find "reminders of a moving quality of atmosphere and enthusiasm in the jostled portion of Miss Millay's best work." For, as Zabel declares, she has had "certain roots deeper than public esteem, than the prestige of prizes and fellowship juries, than Greenwich Village, Times Square, Fifth Avenue and the Left Bank."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Zabel, Op. Cit., p. 571.

And it is to this element that we must look for all that is of permanent poetic value in her work. For no one will deny the appeal of her fresh vibrant personality to her own generation after the first World War, the definite part it seemed of "a pre-war and post-war mood of insurgence." Much of her work is "unmistakeably dated by events and sensations of twentieth-century life."<sup>13</sup> As Schwartz puts it: "Her lyrics were used by the period, and she was made famous by their usefulness; but now they are inseparable from the period, and they will always illuminate the liberated Vassar girl, the jazz age, bohemianism, and the halcyon days of Greenwich Village." In fact, Mr. Schwartz goes still further and declares that "...all that is good in her work, all that is of permanent interest is circumscribed by the period in which she became a famous poetess."<sup>14</sup>

To agree with Mr. Schwartz would be tantamount to denying to Miss Millay all but a historical interest. This, we will not do. True, we agree with Dr. Zabel that "she has been victimized by her 'generation,' by her public, and by her disciples. She has allowed each of them to protect her from the ordeal of independence and poetic proof."<sup>15</sup> And, certainly, we agree with Mr. Schwartz that, had she more definitely sought out and cultivated the actuality of her genuine experience of the New England Coast or of the Maine woods, she would have been a

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Schwartz, Op. Cit., p. 735.

<sup>15</sup> Op. Cit., p. 575.

finer minor poet. As he declares:

...she would not have depended upon attitudes that are as characteristic of literate youth as the sophomore year; after her second volume she would have abandoned the obvious and banal pose she has struck in the face of love and death. She would not be the most famous poetess of our time, and she might have composed a body of poetry characterized by the non-such originality--however, often warped, thin, fragmentary, exotic or ingrown of Marianne Moore, Léonie Adams, Louise Bogan and Janet Lewis, four poets who will never be as popular as Miss Millay.<sup>16</sup>

Yes, we will state that Miss Millay is not a great minor poet. We will further state that, had Miss Millay not been such a popular poet, she might have been a much better minor poet. But this is beside the point. She is a minor poet, whose work at best is very worthy of such a rating. A definite portion of her work is worthy of more than historical interest. She has written often enough in her best vein to merit one critic's observation:

When she has written of her Maine memories, of the sea and its shores, of the homely and enduring ways of human life, or of the simple suffering of the young, she has caught poignant and unmistakable accents of delight and grief. Her lyrics of youth and death preserve them...<sup>17</sup>

In addition to attaining in her best work the very honorable title of poet, not lightly to be bestowed, she has certainly performed the honorable function of the popular literary artist in writing a poetry available to the average sensibility. We can repeat after our study

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<sup>16</sup> Op. Cit., p. 736.

<sup>17</sup> Zabel, Op. Cit., p. 571.

with conviction and understanding Ransom's verdict which we quoted at the beginning:

Miss Millay is the best of the poets who are "popular" and loved by Circles and Leagues of young ladies; perhaps as good a combination as you can ever expect of the "literary" poet and the poet who is loyal to the "human interest" of the common reader....Her career has been one of dignity and poetical sincerity. She is an artist.<sup>18</sup>

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Ransom, Op. Cit., p. 76.

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THE PROBLEM OF THE POPULAR POET

IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA

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## APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Mary Kathryn Stevens has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

January 16, 1947  
Date

Morton D. Zabel  
Signature of Adviser